

FROM FUNNY STUFF TO DEATH



INTRODUCTION

I don't know whether or not there is an actual literary genre called the fantastic story. But whatever the case may be, I've long enjoyed the work of the practitioners of that particular art, from Bierce to Borges and everyone between. So given my love of that "genre," it was perhaps inevitable that sooner or later, I would undertake the task of writing a collection of fantastic stories of my own.

What I've done in these stories is I've taken ideas that came to me from various sources, some of them literary and some of them not, and I've channeled them into scenes and settings from a more-or-less coherent—though totally fictitious—life narrative based upon tales told to me by people I've known. And then in the process of writing the stories, I've twisted the original ideas and distorted them and deformed them until finally I've made them conform to my own peculiar philosophy of life and science and all the rest. And the final result is the stories you now see before you, a collection illustrating my own personal take on the fantastic tale.

I hope you like them.

G. Burton

CONTENTS

<u>FUNNY STUFF</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>A STROLL (OR STROLLS)</u>	<u>16</u>
<u>THE GREAT CONVERGENCE</u>	<u>18</u>
<u>LIVING HISTORY</u>	<u>46</u>
<u>THE BOX!</u>	<u>48</u>
<u>FURNITURE LIB</u>	<u>62</u>
<u>REAL MATH</u>	<u>71</u>
<u>FAMILY ROAD TRIP</u>	<u>76</u>
<u>SCHOOL SCIENCE PROJECT</u>	<u>90</u>
<u>THE TWO OF ME</u>	<u>103</u>
<u>DEATH</u>	<u>122</u>

FUNNY STUFF

You know how it is, don't you? The way that when you hear about something being dangerous or forbidden or something like that, the way you've just gotta go out and see for yourself, right? And I'm not talking about that old stick-your-hand-in-there-and-it'll-get-cut-off-type of danger, either. I'm talking about like how it is with drugs and stuff like that, you know? I'm talking about how the more people tell you that drugs are dangerous and they'll make you crazy and they'll ruin your life and all that sort of crap, the more you've gotta try them out for yourself. The more you've gotta find out what they'll really do to you.

Well, that's how it is with me, anyway. And like that's why when I first heard those stories about that cloister in that little town in Catalonia, that cloister that's supposed to be haunted or cursed or whatever it is, I knew right away that I'd have to go there and see what the place was like. I'd have to see if it could really destroy me or destroy my mind or whatever it was supposed to do to the people who went into that cloister alone. I'd have to go there and give the place a try.

And so no sooner had I heard about it that day when my girlfriend and some of her friends were blabbing away in Catalan... Oh, I forgot to mention that I was living in Barcelona at the time, didn't I? And since I'd only been living there for a few months when all this happened, my Catalan was still pretty thin in those days, and my Castilian? Well, forget about it. All I knew about that language back then was a few words I still remembered from High School Spanish. So about the only way I had to communicate with people was through whatever little bits of English they could speak. That was it.

So anyway, my girlfriend and her friends were talking that day, and my girlfriend says to me in English that they're talking about this cloister where "funny stuff" happens to people. Well, right away I was hooked, and I wanted to know more, but there was none of them could speak enough English to tell me very much. They just kept talking about "funny stuff" and about people going crazy and people disappearing. But they couldn't give me any details or anything like that. Their English wasn't good enough, and as far as my Catalan goes? Well, I already told you about that.

In the end, though, they told me just enough to where I knew I was gonna have to go there and see that cloister for myself first chance I got. And I was gonna have to go there alone like they said was when all the "funny stuff" happened. So when a day came along a couple weeks later, a day when my girlfriend said she was gonna be busy so that I'd have all day to myself to do whatever I wanted, the first thing that came to mind was to head straight for that town and that cloister.

I took a bus that morning that dropped me off right across the street from the church where the cloister was supposed to be, and right away I was crossing the street and heading up the steps that led to the big front doors. And I was heading there like... Well, I soon realized that I was walking there a little too fast and too direct, and I said to myself that maybe I'd better slow down or something. Maybe I'd better take a little time to look the place over and act like I'm just a normal, everyday tourist. Cause I don't wanta give away the fact that I'm here on a mission. I

don't wanta raise any suspicions so that anyone tries to stop me from reaching the cloister, you know what I mean?

And this church was worth looking at anyway. It was one of those old Romanesque-style places, one of those churches from way back, and it was a real pretty one, too. It was one of those simple but graceful stone churches like they used to build a thousand years ago, one with the extra-thick walls and the rounded arches and with just enough decorations and sculptures here and there to make it truly beautiful. And the sculptures were all in that primitive, kinda childish style that makes Romanesque art so appealing.

Well, I looked it over for awhile, and it was a seriously nice-looking building. But I wasn't gonna spend all day standing there and looking at it, either. Cause like I said before, that's not why I came there. So I looked it up and down and all around like any good tourist would do, and then before long, I was pushing the big door open and heading inside.

The inside was kinda dark, like always, and it was built in that typical Romanesque style. It had the three long, extended arches running the length of the church, and it had the rows of big, heavy columns that supported the arches where they came together and that divided the place into three aisles. Typical. And since I didn't see anyone else inside, no one to get suspicious of me if I moved too fast and too direct, I headed straight down the center aisle toward where the central cupola would have to be. Cause by that time, I knew enough about those places to where I knew that the churches were always built in the shape of a cross, with the three aisles where I'd come in forming the foot of the cross and the apse where the altar is located forming the head, and with two arms stretching out on each side. And I knew that there would be a cupola where the four arms came together, right in front of the altar. And on top of that, I knew that the door to the cloister would be located down at the end of one of the two arms. It had to be, cause all those places were built that way, or at least all of them that I'd seen so far.

So I reached the cupola, and I looked down the arms on both sides, and right away at the far end of the right arm, I saw a big wooden door that had to be the one leading to the cloister. I knew it as soon as I saw it. But I also knew that I couldn't head straight for it, though, and that was because of something else I saw off in that direction. It was because of this guard I saw sitting there next to the door.

What the hell was that guy doing there? I asked myself. Why would they have a guard in such a deserted church in such a quiet little town? Why would they bother? And what could he be there to guard against when the two of us were the only people in that whole church?

Now, I couldn't tell from where I was standing whether he was watching me or not. For all I knew, he could have been asleep. But still I told myself that it would be best to start playing tourist again. Just in case. So I strolled up and looked at all the carved and painted structures in and around the altar, and I looked at what was left of an old mural on the wall, and then I began to saunter off to the right, in the direction of the cloister. And I did it in the most casual and distracted way that I could, without even looking at the guard or the door. But when I started to approach the door, the guard stood up from his chair as though to stop me, and when I acted like I was gonna innocently walk around him, he stepped over and blocked my path. And then

standing there right in front of me, he wagged his finger in my face and said, “Solo, no!” And he said it in that slow and clear—and loud—way that the Spanish generally speak to tourists.

Well, I wasn’t sure what to do right then, so I stopped and looked the guy over for the first time. And what an impression he made on me, too. Cause he looked like he must have been damn near as old as the church itself, so old that he could barely stand there without falling down. And as far as that uniform of his went? Why, it looked like it had to be some kind of joke. It was old and frayed and faded, and it looked like he’d been wearing it for the last twenty years, if not the last fifty. So as I stood there and looked at that little old man in the clown suit who blocked my way, my first impulse was to ignore him, to shove my way past and head for the door. But then I thought better of it, cause I knew that if I raised a disturbance right then, it would just make it that much harder for me to ever spend time in the cloister alone. No, I knew that I’d have to find some other way to make it past that sorry little excuse for an authority figure.

So instead of forcing my way past, I smiled down at the old guy and said, “Okay,” and then I walked off in the other direction. And as I wandered off, I went back to playing tourist again. I strolled slowly over to the other arm of the cross, and then I made the circuit around the leg. And I stopped and looked at each and every statue or painting that I came across anywhere along those outer walls of the church. I took my time and looked them over like they were these great works of art, even though the truth is that artistically, they came nowhere near to the level of the building itself. Even a half-educated American like me could see that. But what else could I do, since I needed some excuse for hanging around the church, didn’t I? And anyway, the whole time I was looking at those artworks, my mind was actually busy somewhere else. It was busy trying to come up with a plan for getting past that old fart who stood between me and the cloister. That old fart who blocked me from the object of my quest.

How could I get past him without him noticing me? Could I distract him in some way? Or should I wait him out and hope that eventually he would fall asleep or something? What could I do?

Well, not much, I supposed. So in the end, what I did was I wandered around and around that old church, making I don’t know how many circuits of the place. And the whole time I was walking, my mind was jumping from one scheme to another. On a couple of occasions, other people entered the church and walked around, too, but I just ignored them and kept on walking, and it wasn’t long before each of them had seen all they wanted to see and left the place once again. Before they had left me alone in the church with no one but that pathetic old guard.

By then, I was starting to hate the old guy. He was seriously getting on my nerves. He was turning into a real pain in the... But then all at once, my chance came around. Because as I was hanging out near the front doors of the church, I suddenly saw him go hobbling past in front of the altar. I saw him heading from the right arm of the cross over to the left. And no sooner was he out of sight than I was rushing over to see where he was going. I was rushing over as fast as I could go without making noise, and I got there just in time to see him disappearing through a little door down at the end of the left arm.

He was gone! He must have been going out for a smoke break or a bathroom break or something like that. And what it meant was that my chance had finally arrived. My chance to get through that door and into that cloister. My chance to find out what all those strange stories were really about.

Good riddance, you dried-up old fascist, I wanted to yell at him. You can't stop me now, cause I'm too smart for you. But even as I was patting myself on the back for having outsmarted the old Nazi, I knew down inside that all I'd really done was I'd outlasted him.

However it was that I'd made it, though, the fact was that now I was finally past him. And the adrenaline was starting to shoot through my veins as I rushed over to the door and pulled on its ancient handle until the big, heavy thing swung open. And then after jumping through as quick as I could, I heard the deep but gentle bang as the door swung shut. The door that now cut me off from the rest of the world. The door that sealed me up inside this world of mystery, this world of wonder, this...

But you know what? No sooner had I started to look the place over than I felt this big wave of disappointment come washing over me. I felt this huge letdown. Cause as I looked around me, everything I saw looked so completely ordinary. It looked so... I mean, it looked just like every other cloister I'd seen since I moved to Catalonia. It was all so... so typical! It had the typical covered walkway around the outside of the place and the typical rows of arches holding up the inner square of the walkway, and out in the center, it had the typical garden. There was nothing special or unusual about this place at all. It was just an old cloister with a scrawny, dried-out little garden. And as far as any decorations or other memorable features went, the only thing I could see were the carved column-heads where the support columns met the arches along the inner square. Just those and nothing more. And what about the atmosphere of the place? Why, it was about as calm as a place can be. No strange lights or shapes or sounds, and no ghosts or demons or anything else. Just a lot of peace and quiet.

Is this it? I asked myself. Is this what I went to all that trouble to see? This? Man, what a rip-off! What a... What a joke on me, huh?

But then, what the hell! It's not the biggest sucker-bait I've ever fallen for in my life. And since I'm in here, I may as well look the place over before I go. What do I have to lose? And so with that thought in mind, and with my adrenaline level in a free-fall, I started out to see what there was to see in that plain little cloister. I started out to make the best of my disillusionment.

I walked up toward the nearest column-head, the one that held up the near corner of the square, and I stopped to take a good look at it. And I tell you, it had a great little carving on it, that's for sure. It had a carving of this dragon with a couple of men who looked like they were riding on it or something. And while I liked it a lot and thought it was a beautiful little sculpture, I couldn't get all that excited about it, either. Cause I mean, there was nothing strange or mysterious about it. It was just one of those typical products of an over-active medieval imagination. And I hadn't come all this way and gone to all this trouble just to see some cute little piece of sculpture.

So I looked at it for a minute, maybe more, and then I started out walking off to the right. I started out to make a slow circuit of the cloister. And as I went, my eyes wandered around in all directions, looking over at the blank outer walls of the cloister and up at the ceiling, and looking over to the other side at the plants in the garden. And I especially looked at each and every one of the column-heads as I passed them. I looked at all those great, almost child-like little sculptures, all those scenes of monsters and heroes, and those biblical scenes and all the rest, including the strange ones that I couldn't figure out at all.

Well, I made it around all four sides of the place, and then with a shrug of the shoulders, I turned and started to head back toward the door where I'd come in a few minutes before. But as I took a first step in that direction, I noticed that the door wasn't there where I thought it would be. There were nothing but blank walls in that corner of the structure. And when I looked back at the nearest column-head, I didn't see the carving of the dragon that I'd seen when I first came in, either. I saw some other scene that I didn't remember having seen before.

This is strange, I said to myself. I must have miscounted the sides of the cloister. Cause after all, I hadn't been paying all that much attention to the count, now had I? But the question now became one of whether I'd actually gone around three sides, or had I gone around five? I wasn't sure, though judging from the fact that I didn't recognize the corner column-head, I figured that it must have been three. So shrugging my shoulders once again, I continued my stroll down to the next corner. And as I got close to it, I looked around for the door that would lead me back to the church, the door that I soon saw was nowhere to be found in that corner. No door and no carving of a dragon.

My adrenaline level was making a bit of a come-back now as I looked all around on those blank walls, and as I looked over and tried to see the corner diagonally across from this one. Because if the door wasn't here, that meant I must have gone around five sides on my first little stroll, and it meant that the corner I was looking for would be halfway around from this place where I stood. So I started off in that direction, almost jogging my way around the two sides to get there, and that's because of what I just said about my adrenaline. Cause this place was starting to get on my nerves. And I looked around in the first corner as I passed it, just to make sure, before continuing on to the second corner, the corner where the door had to be. But when I got there and looked around, I saw right away that there was nothing. No door and no carving of a dragon. Nothing but a blank wall and a carving in that corner that I was sure I hadn't seen before.

So what the hell is this? I asked myself. Where could that door have gone? Could it have sealed itself up or something like that? I supposed that could be the answer, but if it was, then where the hell had the dragon gone? Why was it that each time I reached a corner, it had a new carving that I'd never seen before? And I knew damn well that there could only be four corners in this place, right? Four corners and four different carvings.

I was trying to work it all out in my mind. I was asking myself those questions over and over again, but at the same time, I was also searching for some type of plan, for a way to get myself back out of the trap I seemed to have fallen into. And the first thing that came to mind was the question of the direction I'd been walking around the place. Cause up till now, I'd been going around in the same direction the whole time, hadn't I? So what if I just turned around and

went the other way? That might work, don't you think? Well, it sounded pretty weak to me, too, but then what other easy options did I have? And besides, there was nothing to lose by trying it, was there?

So I started walking back around the cloister in the opposite direction, passing one and two corners and looking around in each of them as I went by, looking for the door and looking for the dragon. Five, six, seven, I passed one corner after another, but I couldn't find a door anywhere, and as far as those column-heads went, it seemed like I kept seeing more and more new ones. Nine, ten, I knew that by this time, I'd gone past wherever it was that I first came into this place, but what other choice did I have? Cause if I stopped now, that would mean I was giving up, wouldn't it? That would mean I was really and truly stuck in this place with no way out.

What the hell had I done? I asked myself. What had I gone and gotten myself into? Some type of weird space-warp or something like that? It was all so... so... It was scary in a way, but at the same time, it was all kinda bland, too. All kinda nothing. Cause here I'd come into this place expecting to meet ghosts or demons or something like that, and the one thing I'd been counting on when I saw them was that the door would still be there for me to escape back out of if I needed to. And what I hadn't been expecting was a whole lot of peace and quiet and a kinda gentle snare like the one I was in. I hadn't been expecting to find myself being trapped by the space itself, by some sort of breakdown in the basic laws of physics or whatever it was that was happening in here.

Now why hadn't I listened to my girlfriend?

But you know what? This was no time to be getting after myself. This was the time to be looking for a solution. This was the time to be looking for a way out of this warped and distorted cage. And as I stopped walking, I said to myself that the one place I still hadn't tried around here was the garden out in the center of the cloister. I hadn't been out there yet, now had I? And for all I knew, it might hold the key to the way out of here. And if you say that this one sounds like an even weaker hope than my last one, well I won't argue with you about that.

So anyway, what I did was I stepped through one of the small openings in the railing that give access to the garden, and then after walking out to the very center of the place, I stopped to look around me. I turned slowly and looked at all four sides of the cloister, and at the same time, I looked at the world above its roofs. And while on three sides, I saw nothing up there but sky, on the fourth side, I clearly saw the big, imposing side and roof of the solid-built old Romanesque church that this cloister was attached to. And telling myself that now I knew where the door had to be—it had to be in one of the corners that touched the church—I walked straight over to one of them and then to the other. But there was no door in either corner. Nothing but blank walls. And when I turned to look at each of the corner column-heads, I saw that they contained even more new carvings that I'd never seen before.

So what did this mean? And what could I do now? Could I take another look around? Or could I see if there was some way to climb out of here? Yeah, that was it. I could go back out into the garden and look for a place where I might be able to climb out. Cause that could be my escape, couldn't it?

When I got back out to the center and began to look around, though, there was something strange that struck me right away. And that was the fact that this time when I looked around at the sky above the cloister, I saw that the side of the church was in a different position from where it had been just a minute or two earlier. I saw that, and it was like suddenly a shock wave ran through my body when I did. Cause this was getting to be way too strange for me. It was like this whole cloister was spinning around or something. It was... It was impossible! That's what it was.

But I had to control myself, and I knew it. I couldn't let this wave of panic get to me. I couldn't give in to it if I ever wanted to get out of here in one piece. I had to keep my head and think my way out of this ever-changing maze. I had to!

It wasn't long before I got back to the idea of looking for a place to climb out of the cloister, but I soon saw that it was completely hopeless. Because the place was way too high, and I couldn't see anything up above that I'd be able to grab onto. And with no way to climb out and no new ideas coming into my head, that meant my only hope was to go over and try the corners by where the church now stood. And while I knew that it was a hopeless hope, I just couldn't think of anything else to do. I just...

Well, I went over, and of course the door wasn't in either of those two corners. I'd known beforehand that it wouldn't be. But then as I was walking back to the garden, I started to come up with yet another plan. Cause like what if I went in-and-out, in-and-out, and I watched for the way the position of the church kept changing. And if I could just find some type of pattern in its movements, why then maybe I'd be able to anticipate where the church would be next time around, and in that way, I could find the door, right? Right?!... Yeah, I know it sounds like a long-shot, but what other choice did I have right then?

So I did it a few times. I walked to the center of the garden and looked around, and I walked over to the corners that touched the church I'd just seen, and then I walked back out to the center. But then this one time when I was on my way back to the garden, I saw something that sent a real shockwave through my body, a shock that was even bigger than the shocks I'd been feeling up till then. Cause this time when I looked out at the garden, what I saw was darkness. What I saw was night, even though I knew damn well that it was somewhere around midday.

So what could this be all about? I asked myself. Was there an eclipse or something? Or was it already night? And if it was night, then what ever happened to twilight? How was it that it had gone from daylight to pitch-dark in less than a minute? It couldn't have! It just couldn't!!

When the panic came over me now, it was far too strong for me to fight off. Cause if time was gonna go crazy on me in the same way that space had already done, then what chance did I have left? How would I ever be able to get out of here? How could I save myself? And in sheer panic, I began to run. I ran into... Where? Where did I have to go? I ran into a corner and then down to another and another. I had to get out of there! I had to get out of that contorted, distorted space-time maze before it was too late. Before... Wait a minute, did I just say too late? How could I even talk about late when time was going crazy on me the way it was? How could that word mean anything?

I knew there was no place to run, and I knew that I had to fight this panic if I ever wanted to get out of there alive and with my sanity intact. I knew I had to beat it somehow. So with a great effort of will, I managed to stop myself from running, and then I told myself to breathe deeply. To take long, slow, deep breaths, to take the air in and hold it, and to let it out slowly. To let the air calm my nerves. To let it bring me back to my rational mind. Because that was what I would have to hold onto if I wanted to survive this thing. I would have to hold onto that stillness, that place of peace that lay somewhere deep within me.

When I had finally calmed down enough to start looking for a new strategy, some new way to escape my predicament, I looked back into the garden only to see that it was daylight once again. And while that was exactly what I had somehow been expecting to see when I looked, still there was something about the scene before me that seemed a little off. Because while the cloister itself looked pretty much the same as it had before, there was something about the garden that looked quite different. The plants were different from what they had been before. Different plants in different locations. And as I looked at them, I knew that while day had returned, it couldn't possibly be the same day as before, probably not even the same year, and for all I knew, it might not even be the same century!

Now, a minute or two earlier, that thought surely would have sent me off into another wave of panic, but what it did now was it had the exact opposite effect. It sent me off in the other direction, in the direction of my inner peace. Because what I felt at that moment wasn't fear at all. What I felt was a strange sort of tranquility, a feeling of openness and acceptance of my situation. A feeling of deep-seated calm. A calm that was quickly growing and spreading throughout my being. Because I knew I was on a crazy ride through space and time, and I knew there was nothing I could do about it. I knew there was no escape and no need to plan or to search out new strategies. No, there was nothing to do but accept it and go along with it. Like the way you do when you're on a bad acid trip. The way you just sit back and let it all happen. The way you go along for the ride to wherever it is that you're being taken.

So I started to stroll around the place once again, no longer thinking about the door that wasn't there, but instead watching everything that was happening around me. And it was strange. It was very strange, though at the same time, it was fascinating. Because each time I looked away from the garden for a moment and then looked back at it, I saw something different. I saw a different time of day or a different season of the year or a different garden from a different era. And of course the cloister itself kept changing, too, with the position of the church being different each time I looked for it, and with the carvings on the column-heads constantly changing. And in fact, it soon reached the point where, if I looked at one of those carvings and then glanced away for a second, it would be different when I looked back up at it again. It would change almost before my eyes.

So this is it, huh? I told myself. This is the funny stuff that happens in this cloister. This way that the laws of space and time seem to break down or to disappear or whatever. And if that's so, then what does it mean about my future? Does it mean that I'll be trapped in here forever? Either my body or my mind? Does it mean that I'll disappear never to be seen again? Or does it mean that while I might eventually be found, my mind will remain lost forever in this labyrinth? That while people might find my body, my mind will always be stuck here in this strange, distorted world where it is now?

I had no idea what the answers were to those questions, and I told myself with a bit of a laugh that they were things I would have to find out the hard way. And the only thing I was sure of was that my greatest enemy was my panic, that it was the only thing that could truly destroy me. And that as long as I held onto this place of calm waters deep inside me, I still had a chance of coming out of this thing okay. And even if I didn't, why there had to be worse hells than this, weren't there? Cause I mean, this place wasn't so bad as long as you looked at it coolly and calmly, was it?

So I walked around and around, sometimes strolling around the walkway of the cloister with its ever-changing structure, and sometimes wandering through the garden with its ever-changing seasons. And it wasn't until I decided to sit down on a little kinda bench in the middle of the garden that I noticed there was something else that was starting to change, too. And that's because when I glanced down at my legs as I bent them to sit, I saw that the legs I was bending weren't my own legs at all! They were strange-looking legs wearing pants I'd never seen before. They were someone else's legs!

I asked myself what the hell was this, and when I did so, I realized that I wasn't even asking the question in English. I was asking it in some other language, some language I didn't understand, though somehow I understood it all perfectly. And at the same time that my language was being crowded out of me by this other person's language, I also felt his emotions moving in and taking over from my own. I felt his panic flooding in and taking hold of me! I felt it squeezing my chest and constricting my lungs, and I felt it sending my mind leaping toward images of flight.

I had to fight it, and I knew it. I had to overcome this panic. But when I turned my attention inward and searched for that calm place deep inside, what I found in there was a terrible mess. I found a jumble of I-don't-know-what. Because all mixed up with me and with scenes of my life, there were these other scenes, too. There were scenes from a different life that someone had lived hundreds of years ago. Scenes from the life of this guy who was now me or at least was a part of me, this guy whose life and mind were now all mixed up with my own.

I had to find G. I had to find myself and my recently acquired inner peace. And it was only after a long search down strange corridors of my freshly homogenized mind that I finally came upon it. I finally found that place of calm and acceptance, that place of slow, deep breaths and soothed nerves. I found that place that could be called me, that place in which G's placid center still stood apart and alone.

Calmer now, I looked at my hands, those hands that were no longer my own. I looked at that other person's hands, and I asked myself who he was and how he could have gotten here. Had he become trapped in this place just like I had? And had he been here during all these centuries? I could see his life in my memories now, but I couldn't see all of it, so I had no way of answering those questions. And that was because of the way his memories had become so completely mixed up with my own. The way they would only go so far before they blended into a memory from my own life. Because he was me, and I was I-don't-know-who. I was some strange amalgam with nothing to call my own. Nothing but that one single place, that place of inner peace. That place from which I could watch everything, from our mixed-up memories to our confused thoughts. And at the same time, I could watch the other guy's panic as it continued

to blaze away unabated. And watching that panic, I knew that while I had managed to save myself—at least for now—there was nothing in the world I could do for this other poor guy. Because the fact is that it was up to him and him alone. It was up to him to overcome his panic for himself. I couldn't do it for him.

And there was nothing I could do to help the next guy, either. Cause as you've probably guessed by now, it wasn't long before I looked down to find myself in yet another strange body, the body of I-don't-know-who from I-don't-know-when in the past. And along with this new body came all the weird phenomena that had accompanied the last one. The thoughts in a strange language that I somehow understood, and the jumble of new memories mixing and blending with my own—and with those of the last guy, too, since his were still hanging around in there—and also the new wave of panic that this guy brought with him. And even though my mind was now a much bigger mess than it had been before, what with three people being mixed together rather than two, still it was easier for me to find my inner peace this time around than it had been before. Because by now, I knew exactly where to look for it. I knew where to find G within that huge, confused mess. I knew where to find that void place that seemed to be the only thing left of what I'd always called my self. That place of calm and openness and acceptance. That place of emptiness and nothingness.

When my thoughts had cleared up enough after the second transformation for me to become aware of my surroundings once again, I found that I was up and walking around the cloister. I found that I was wandering around aimlessly in a sort of a panicked daze. And while I felt like I was rapidly losing control of this body I was in, like the other two guys I was sharing it with were the ones who now commanded my movements, still I didn't worry too much about it. Because I knew that the important thing was to maintain control of my mind, to hold onto that place I still called me. And whatever it was that the body decided to do, why that really didn't matter a whole lot, now did it?

Well, it wasn't long before I found myself in still another new and different body, this one belonging to some guy from the future, I supposed. And that's because of the way the jumble of memories he brought along with him seemed so very strange to me. They were memories of things that I couldn't place at all. Memories of ways of living that were far different from the past or the present. Memories that had to have come from somewhere way down the line. And it wasn't long after I'd managed to bob and weave my way past the guy's panic and back to my own place of peace that I found myself walking around in yet another new body, the body of a woman this time. A woman who brought along still more memories, and who brought along her own wave of panic for me to overcome—or at least to dodge.

The changes were coming faster and faster all the time now. And it wasn't long before they stopped waiting for me to turn my back in order to take place. But instead, they began to occur right in front of me, right before my eyes. And that meant that now, the structure of the cloister would move and change as I stood watching it, and the time of day and the seasons would change as well. They would jump from summer to winter or from day to night just like that, with almost no transition. And they would do so as I stood looking on.

And the same thing was happening with my body as well. It was beginning to change before my eyes. And when I held my hands up in front of me, I could see them changing into a

different set of hands and then another and another. And it was all happening so fast that I could no longer remember who I was. I couldn't remember who G was, and I couldn't remember who it was that had originally walked into this cloister. Had it been someone from the fifteenth century or the twenty-fifth? A man or a woman? I didn't know any more. And the only thing I knew for sure was that I had to cling to that one place, that place of peace that was the only thing I could still call my own. I had to cling—that is if you can call it clinging when you hold onto a place inside yourself that's void and nothing by its very nature. I had to cling to it, and I had to let everything else go by.

But the truth is that it wasn't as hard to keep myself in that place as it might seem. And that's because by now, the changes were coming so fast that they barely had the time or the strength to dent that place deep inside me. The thoughts, the memories, the waves of panic. They came washing in and then bounced back off with no effect. They came and they went, and my inner peace remained the same, untouched and unassailable.

Soon, everything was going by so fast that it all started to blend one thing into another. The changes in seasons, the changes in bodies, everything began to turn into one giant, dizzying blur. Everything was losing its distinctness. And it felt like I was in some huge, swirling pool of water, some gigantic sink where everything was spinning faster and faster all the time, spinning and drawing me inexorably inward and downward toward some sort of giant drain-hole. I was being pulled closer and closer, and there was nothing I could do about it. And the only thing I had working in my favor was my sense of inner calm which somehow slowed the descent, though even it wasn't enough to stop it completely. But if I were ever to let it go, if I were ever to panic, I knew that I'd be down that hole in a second.

So I watched, and I waited—waited for I knew not what. And then all at once, it was there. All at once, it appeared before me, that dragon I somehow recognized. That dragon carved in stone. And no sooner had I seen it than I knew that my chance had arrived, my one and only chance to save myself. But I also knew that if I wanted to seize it, I would have to leave this inner place behind. I knew I would have to take action.

Jump! I told myself. Jump!! You have to jump. It's your only chance!

And my will flowed down to... It flowed down to somewhere. I don't know where. It flowed down to whatever there was left of the physical me. It flowed to some body, to some pair of arms and some pair of legs.

Jump! Jump!! I told them.

And next thing I knew, they were doing it. They were jumping—I was jumping. I was leaping up and wrapping my arms around that dragon, and I was holding on with my cheek pressed up against it. I was holding on for all I had as everything around me continued to swirl and twirl and spin ever faster and faster, as everything continued to change all around me. Everything but the dragon, that is. Everything flowed and dashed about, and I thought I could even hear it being sucked down that giant hole somewhere out there, that hole leading to who-knows-where. I could see it, and I could hear it, and I could feel it as everything was sucked down and down, that whole huge, spinning, gurgling mess. And then all at once, it was gone.

The cloister was a place of peace and quiet once again. And as I looked around me from where I hung high above the ground, clutching onto the dragon, I immediately saw the big wooden door that led back to the church. I saw the door that led back to the real world outside this cloister. And all I had to do to return to that world was to let myself down from where I was and then walk through that door.

But sometimes things like that are easier to say than they are to do, cause for one thing, my head was still I-don't-know-where. It was all so... The thoughts and everything else in it were so jumbled up that I had very little control over them. And the same thing went double for my body, because as I looked at those arms wrapped around the column-head, I wasn't even sure that they were my own arms at all. I mean, yeah sure, I recognized them. Kinda. But did that mean that they were really mine? And did it mean that I could control them? I just didn't know. And when I saw exactly how far I was up that column at the time, I wasn't so much interested in asking myself how I had managed to get all the way up there as I was in asking how I was gonna get down without killing myself. How was I gonna do it when I didn't even know how to control these arms and these legs?

I was afraid of falling, but then all at once, I thought about what would happen if I held on so long that the door out of here were to disappear on me again. What would happen then? And when I thought about that possibility, suddenly the idea of a little fall didn't seem nearly as scary. So with that thought in mind, I told my body, Okay, go ahead and do your stuff.

Well, the landing wasn't as hard as it could have been, considering, and it didn't take me long to get up and head for the door as fast as those well-known yet unfamiliar legs would take me. And then raising my arms, those arms that must have been mine, I pushed the door open and made my escape. I returned to the world that I'd left... when? Hours ago? Or minutes? Or had it been days? Or even centuries?

As I stepped back into that beautiful old Romanesque church, the door banged shut behind me. And when it did, the old guard jumped up from his chair faster than I ever would have thought him capable as he turned to see what was happening behind him. And no sooner had he seen me walking toward him with I know not what sort of crazy, glazed look in my eyes than he slid back several steps, crossing himself over and over again as he watched me with an expression of horror on his face.

Hey, don't worry about me, I wanted to tell the shriveled-up little Franquista, but I didn't know if I could control my vocal chords well enough to actually say anything intelligible. And even if I could, I didn't know if I'd be able to say it in a language that he would understand. So instead of saying anything, I simply gave him a big smile. A soothing smile of calm and reassurance. Or at least I should say that I tried to give him a smile, cause considering how little control I had over the muscles around my mouth, I have no idea what expression I finally came up with.

Judging by his reaction, though, it couldn't have been a very good one. Cause what he did when he saw it was he jumped back a couple of steps farther, and then he crossed himself even faster than before. So I made a quick attempt at defusing the situation by saying, "Hola,"

but the moment he heard whatever sound it was that came out of my mouth, his eyes grew even wider with fear than they had been before.

I was afraid to move any closer to him right then, afraid that he'd run off and raise an alarm against me if I did, so the only thing I could do was to take another shot at speech. And I gathered whatever thoughts I could before making the attempt. I gathered my thoughts, and I concentrated them in my mind as best I could, and then I directed them out toward my mouth. "Molt... Molt..." but I couldn't come up with another Catalan word to finish the phrase, so finally I waved my arms around in the air, hoping that this gesture would give the old guy some impression of the words I was trying to find.

But he didn't get the idea at all, as I could see from the way he almost turned and ran away at the sight. And also from the way he finally stopped crossing himself only to raise his arms into a defensive posture as a look of near-panic swept over his face.

I wasn't getting through to this guy, and it seemed like the more I tried, the worse I kept making the situation. And I knew I had to do something to calm him down. I had to do something to convince him that I was okay. But what could I do when all my physical gestures made him feel even more threatened by me than before? What could I do but make the effort to speak to him one more time? And to speak using whatever words in whatever language I could come up with in this benumbed and bewildered brain of mine.

"Molt... Molt... interesting!" I finally managed to say. And while I could see that the old guy had no idea what I was trying to express with that strange phrase of mine, I also saw that my voice was now beginning to sound a little more like a human voice. Because when he heard it this time, the expression on his face softened noticeably, and at the same time, he dropped his arms down from their defensive position. And then as I spoke several more nonsense phrases to him, and as I smiled calmly and gently, his expression gradually evolved from one of fear to one of simple curiosity. So in the end, when I made a gesture that I wanted to walk past, he answered by nodding his head at me. Nodding it and then nodding again as a way of telling me to go ahead and be on my way.

And with that, I calmly walked over and down the aisle and then out the front door as the old guy waited for me to leave before scrambling out behind me to spread the word about what had just taken place. I stopped when I reached the bus stop, and then I stood and waited for the bus that would take me back to Barcelona. I stood and waited as the people of the town began to gather around me, standing off at a safe distance and speaking among themselves and pointing and then shaking a hand as though it had been burned. They watched me, and they talked about me, but none of them dared come near me, this crazy foreigner with the weird, dazed look in his eyes. This strange guy who had walked into—and somehow managed to walk back out of—that accursed and demon-plagued cloister by himself.

But they needn't have worried about me, cause the fact is that I was okay. I really was. And while I might have suffered a certain amount of damage, still I think the experience was well worth it. Cause like maybe my memory is completely shot, and when I try to remember anything, I always find all these strangers' memories in strange languages mixed up with the one I'm looking for. Like if I try to remember what I did yesterday, I might come up with something

that happened in the Eighteenth Century or who-knows-when. And if I ever try to think about some problem or some idea, I get all this interference from these other people's thoughts and ideas. And like even now as I was writing this little story, I really can't tell you how much of that stuff actually happened to me and how much of it happened to someone else. Cause I'm just not sure anymore.

But you know what? None of that stuff is all that important when you get right down to it. Cause that was one hell of a trip I went on in that cloister, and you've gotta expect to pay a price for something like that. So like my memory, my mind, or at least a part of it, that's not such a big price to pay for an experience like that, do you think?

A STROLL (OR STROLLS)

G stepped out of the bank on a beautiful Barcelona spring day. He felt in his pocket for the money he had just put there, and at the same time, he felt for his passport. Just making sure. And then turning to his right, he started off in the direction of his apartment. He strolled along the busy sidewalk, weaving slightly to avoid oncoming pedestrians while cars and buses and motorcycles sped by on the street just a few feet away. They shot past at amazing speeds, or at what had seemed like amazing speeds to him before, though by now he had been living there long enough to where those speeds were beginning to seem normal. The high velocity, the roaring engines, the apparent recklessness of the drivers. All part of a typical day in his life in Barcelona.

He crossed a small street that lay in his path and continued on toward the next, busier intersection. But then as the traffic slowed and came to a halt for a red light at that intersection, he suddenly stopped as well when he spotted someone in the crowd up ahead. Wait a minute! he said to himself. Who's that guy crossing the street up there? It can't be! He looks just like...

* * *

G stepped out of the bakery on a wet and grey Barcelona fall day with a newly-purchased loaf of bread in his hand. He stopped at a bakery nearly every day now, having acquired the local habit of eating freshly-baked bread. And it was almost always this same bakery, too, since it was the one nearest his apartment. With its being located at the corner of a busy intersection, though, he could only walk a few steps outside the door before he had to stop and wait for the light to change. He had to wait until it was safe for him to continue on his way home across the bigger and busier of the two streets.

It wasn't long before the crossing signal appeared, and with that, he began to move along with the rest of the pedestrians. But then as he reached the middle of the street, he glanced off to his left toward the entrance to his apartment building, and the sight he saw there made him freeze in his tracks. Hey, hold it! he said to himself. Who's that guy over there? Standing out in front of the building? It's impossible, cause he looks exactly like...

* * *

G stepped out the front door of his apartment building into a bright, hot Barcelona summer day, and as he did so, he stopped for a moment to consider his next move. Let's see now, where was it that he was going? And what was the best way to get there from here? Should he take one of the buses that stop right outside his door? Or should he walk down the street the two or three blocks that would take him to the subway? What should his next move be?

He stood and thought about it for a few seconds. But then as he glanced across the street toward the narrow cross-street leading to the parking lot where he and his girlfriend kept their car, his thoughts were suddenly interrupted by someone he saw standing there. Hey, who's that? he asked himself. Who's that guy over there waiting to cross the street? It can't be who it looks like. No way! Cause that guy looks just like...

* * *

G walked up the small street from the parking lot on a cold and blustery Barcelona winter day. And as he arrived at the edge of the big, busy street he would have to cross in order to reach his apartment, he pulled one hand out of his coat pocket and used it to push the crossing button. Then before returning the hand to its place of relative warmth, he tried to zip the coat up just a little bit higher. He tried but failed, and so scrunching his shoulders up in an effort to protect his neck, he stood and waited for the light to change.

As he did so, he looked up and down the street. Anything to take his mind off the misery he felt standing there in his too-thin jacket. He looked left and right, and then suddenly his gaze froze upon someone he saw walking away from him, someone crossing the small square that lay a block or two down the street. Who could that be? he asked himself. Because he looks so familiar from behind. He looks like he has to be... Even though he can't possibly be... He looks like...

* * *

G walked along the busy street on a cool but sunny Barcelona fall day. It was a beautiful day, he told himself. Or at least it would be if it weren't for all this traffic and all this noise. Because how can anyone enjoy a nice day like this when he's trapped amidst all this man-made chaos? He can't.

G was starting to get tired of the city and its crowding after all these years. He'd had enough of the big city, and he longed for his small-town roots. And the few little shrubs in the square he was just beginning to cross were hardly his idea of natural beauty. He looked at those shrubs as he walked past, and he looked out ahead, too. And then all at once, he jerked to a halt at the sight of someone he saw starting down the steps leading to the subway. He jerked to a halt, and the person behind him came crashing into him. What the hell?! he said to himself. Who's that over there? I can't believe it! Cause that guy looks exactly like...

* * *

G dodged pedestrians on a blistering Barcelona summer day. He did his best to avoid collisions as he made his way along the crowded and chaotic corner. Just another day in paradise, he told himself as the sweat poured off him and as he weaved his way along: two steps, halt, three steps, turn, two steps...

It took some time, but he finally managed to reach his destination. He reached the steps that would take him down to the subway, down off this crowded street to a crowded subway platform and a crowded train. A train that would then take him to some other hot, crowded corner in this over-sized, over-stuffed city. This beautiful city, this vital city. This city he still loved in spite of everything.

THE GREAT CONVERGENCE

As he did each year, G was spending much of that summer on the island of Menorca. He was there with his girlfriend M, of course, his best friend and lover, and his wife in all but name. The two of them were staying at the house her parents had built in the forest out on the edge of the farm that had been in her father's family for a number of generations.

It was a big, sprawling house they had built in that forest, one big enough to house all their daughters and sons-in-law and whatever grandchildren might be along during those long, lazy summer days—and that's not to mention Christmas and other holidays. The house had originally been a rather compact vacation home for the parents and their many cute little daughters, but then as M's father had neared the age of retirement, they had expanded it and expanded it until finally it stretched all the way around a good-sized inner garden. And that garden was the focal spot of family life during those hot summer days, that garden and the long, wide covered porch that stood outside the entrance to the main house and over-looked the garden. Because it was on that porch that long tables were laid out and meals served three times a day, and it was that porch upon which people would often lounge about during the hours between meals.

The farm where the house was located was one of the largest on the entire island, running all the way from the wide fields down by the road and the big, traditional Menorcan-style farmhouse that sat on a rise above those fields, back into the hills far behind. And while the fields in the backlands got smaller and narrower the farther you got from the road, small fields cut off from each other by hills of rock and scrub-oak, still the land had a charm all its own. It was rugged and natural in a way that's seldom seen in Mediterranean Spain, and it had many points of interest, too. Like for instance, there was one hill where if you climbed all the way to the top of the big rocks at its crest, you could get a panoramic view of the northern coast of the island. And there was another rock on one of those hills that the family called the eagle rock, that for the simple reason that it was shaped like a giant perched eagle. And then there was another place out in those hills that the family called the cave of the bones, though in truth it was a rather poor excuse for a cave, being in reality little more than a huge over-hanging rock of sandstone whose face sloped outward as it rose so that it formed a big hollow down near the base. And while the part about its being a cave was a bit of an exaggeration, the other part of its name, the part about the bones, was a title it well deserved. Because back inside that hollow, back in that cave if you want to call it that, the ground was thick with bones and artifacts from ancient bronze-age burials.

The family had known about the site for many years—the family and no one else—and from time to time, they would go out there to play amateur archeologists, digging up several-thousand-year-old bronze bracelets and pendants and tools along with a few skulls and bone fragments. Performing their own private little excavation of that one among the hundreds or even thousands of bronze-age sites that litter the island of Menorca, sites many of which are far more important than the cave of the bones.

Like for instance, the island is covered with *talaiots*, the old defensive towers that give the bronze-age culture of the island its name: the *Talaiotic*. And in addition, there are dozens of

taules, a type of one-legged dolmen that's found all over the island. These dolmens generally consist of a big slab of stone, one that's been worked smooth into a nearly perfect rectangular shape and then placed on its end, while on top of it sits another huge stone which has also been smoothed and squared off. They sit there forming a sort of giant one-legged table, and in fact, that's exactly what the Catalan/Menorcan word *taula* means. It means table. And along with the *talaiots* and the *taules*, there are other even more remarkable remains on the island. Like for instance, there is an entire bronze-age town that remains nearly intact. And then of course there are the *navetes*, the two burial chambers said to have been built in the shape of an upside-down boat, with the bigger of the two, *Sa Naveta d'es Tudons*, serving as the emblematic piece of Menorcan archeology. The piece whose picture graces all the tourist brochures.

So given all the archeological riches to be found on the island, the family felt no compunction about keeping their own little site a secret from the scientific world. Their site which wasn't even an original one in any case since all the artifacts buried there had actually been found a few generations earlier while one of the fields nearby was being plowed. They had been found and then reburied in the cave by members of a generation that placed more value upon respect for the dead than it did upon archeological knowledge.

That summer, though, the family's attention was far removed from the cave of the bones during those hot days that came one after the other after the other the way they do every summer in Menorca. Their attention was focused mainly upon trips to one beach or another, or that is, all the family except G who was spending more and more time at the cave as each day went by. And that was because of the fact that recently, the entire extended family, all the aunts and uncles and cousins who shared the ownership of the farm, had finally gotten together and agreed to sell the place. Or at least they had agreed to sell all but a strip along one side of the farm, the strip where M's parents' house was located and where each of the other co-owners had already carved out a few hectares to call his or her own. And what the imminent sale of the land meant was that this would be the last summer during which any of them would have access to the hills and trails of the sprawling old farm. The last time they would be able to visit the eagle rock, and the last time they would be able to dig in the cave of the bones.

And while everyone else in the family seemed blithely unconcerned that the excavation of the cave would never be finished, everyone including M's father who had always organized and led the digs in the past, the very idea of leaving the project unfinished grated upon G's Yankee spirit. It offended his can-do attitude to think that just because of a little heat, all those remaining artifacts would be left in the ground forever, or at least until some new owner discovered the site and dug them up. So why not put out a little effort, huh? Why not go out there and get the job done once and for all?

So to accomplish that end, G was hiking out each morning with a basket and tools in hand. He was walking up the trails that led across fields and around hills, hopping one of those typical Menorcan stone fences along the way and passing through a couple of gates to get past others. And then at a certain point, he was leaving the fields behind. He was heading up the winding forest path that would take him to his final destination: that place the family so generously called a cave. And after spending a few hours at the cave, a few hours of probing and digging and moving dirt, he was hiking back the same way he'd just come, tools still in hand but

with the basket now filled with prehistoric treasures. Filled with the fruits of his morning's labors.

One day, though, as he was walking up that last forest trail, the trail that led right to the cave, he suddenly found himself confronted by a weird-looking character who seemed to have popped out of the trees or perhaps from behind a rock. The stranger stood there blocking his path while making some sort of unintelligible signs with his hands, and when G failed to respond in kind, it wasn't long before the specter spoke, "Are you one of us?"

"One of you...?" One of who? G had to ask himself. He had no idea what this guy could be talking about. And as he looked him over, this filthy tramp with the spacey blue eyes and the tangled blond hair and scraggly beard and the ragged clothes—this guy who looked like a throw-back to the hippie days at their sloppiest and their most unwashed—he asked himself if he could possibly be one of them. Still.

Because after all, he had cut his hair and shaved his beard a few years earlier, and along with his now normal and conventional look, he was living as normal and conventional a life as he was capable of living. He was shipping out occasionally when he needed the money, and between ships, he was living a quiet life in Barcelona. He was living the way that any other cultural refugee would live, the way that any other fugitive from the banality of life in Reagan's America would live.

So being asked if he was one of them by this living relic, this English-accented artifact of the seventies at their strangest, he had no idea how he should answer the question. And all he could do in reply was to stand speechless and wait for the strange one to speak again.

"Yes, one of us. Are you one who has been Called?"

"Called...? I don't know what you mean."

"So you're not?" the strange one asked in an accusatory tone. "But how could that be? How could you know about this place if you're not?"

"This place? You mean this...?"

"I mean this place of the Old Ones," the strange one interrupted. "How could you know about it if you haven't been Called?"

The Old Ones? So this guy was talking about the cave all right, G told himself. But how could he possibly know about it? Because it was a family secret, wasn't it? And he was obviously not part of the family.

"That *is* where you're going, isn't it?" the strange one continued. "You're going to the place of the Old Ones just ahead?"

"Yeah..." G had no idea what to make of this guy, and he stood impassive as the strange one looked him up and down before focusing in on the tools in his hand. And after looking at those tools for a moment or two, the strange one came back in a thoroughly condemnatory tone.

“Oh, I see now. I see who you are. You’re one of those who come to dig, not one who comes to learn. You’re one of them!”

“Well, I don’t know if I’m one of them or one of those or one of the others...”

But once again, the strange one cut him off in mid-sentence. “You should know that this place is of no importance to people like you,” he said in that snootiest of all irritatingly superior British tones. “You should know that the things you have come to find are not as the Old Ones left them.”

Now how the hell did he know that? G asked himself. How did this guy know that those things had been reburied there? How could he know when it was all part of the family secret? And when not only was he not part of the family, but he seemed to have no local connections whatsoever. Because as he had spoken, he hadn’t used a single word in Menorcan or even one in Spanish. No, everything he had said so far had been in English, and in an English that carried not the least hint of local flavoring. So how could he know so much about the cave?

G felt offended by the tone the guy was taking with him, but at the same time, he was intrigued by what he seemed to know. So swallowing a bit of pride, he decided to come right out and ask the guy. “So what was this place if it wasn’t a place of burial?”

“You mean to say that you don’t know? You who have already been to this place? You’ve been there and still you don’t know? You’ve been there, and you’ve felt nothing?” And the strange one said it in a tone that was even more condescendingly insulting than the one he had been using up until then.

Now this guy was getting onto G’s nerves for real, and he had to suppress an urge to tell him to get the hell out of there, to tell him that he was on private property and he would have to leave. G wanted to say it and take this self-important ass down a notch or two, but he knew that if he said anything, the guy would just laugh at him and insult him even more with comments about his small-mindedness and his property-illusion. No, if he were to go down that road, he would surely end up having to take the guy on physically, and even though that would probably have been an easy task considering how scrawny and underfed the guy looked, still it was a task he hadn’t the least desire to undertake. So instead, G told himself that the best thing to do right then was to swallow even more of his pride, or at least to appear to do so. It was to bide his time by apparently going along with this jerk. It was to humor him and maybe even to get a sort of sly revenge by playing the guy a little bit. “Well, to tell you the truth, I *did* kinda feel something when I was there, though I’m not really sure...”

“So you felt it!” the strange one cut him off. “So you really are one of us!”

“Yeah, I guess...”

“And I knew it! I knew it right from the moment I saw you. I knew that you were one of us, and I was sure that I couldn’t be wrong about something like that!” And as the strange one said it, his air of distance and superiority seemed to have vanished completely. It seemed to have converted almost instantly into an air of enthusiasm and even one of brotherhood.

G didn't know how to react to this sudden change in personality, and in any case, he didn't know what to say in answer to an exclamation like that. So instead of speaking, he smiled and waited for the strange one to continue.

"So what was it that you felt exactly? Can you describe it to me? Was it just the vibrations, or was it the full floating effect?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure..."

"And was the sound there? Did you hear anything? Or did you see anything?"

"I'm not really sure..." Because how could G answer a question like that when in fact he was just making it up? When in fact, he had felt nothing.

"And the smell? Did you get the smell?"

"The smell...?" Now what the hell was this idiot talking about?

"No, I'm sure you couldn't have gotten the smell. Not at *your* stage of spiritual development. And especially when you don't even understand the basics." And with that statement, the strange one shook his head and fell into a sort of meditative silence.

G had no idea what to say in response, but he felt an urge to continue the conversation since he still hadn't discovered how it was that this guy knew so much about the cave. And so while he intensely disliked the man, and while he really didn't want to get him started again, still he had to try asking the question one more time. "So what exactly was this place?"

"Was?! Why are you asking me what it was when you should be asking what it *is*?" And as the strange one spoke, that old haughty tone of his was creeping back into his voice. "This is one of the most important power-places on the entire island, if not the most important. It's one of the most powerful of them all, one of the powerful among the powerful."

"This place...?" G was completely taken aback by that assertion. Because how could such a poor little excuse for a cave be so powerful and so important on an island that's literally covered with prehistoric monuments the way Menorca is? And with so many other and seemingly better places to choose from, how could this guy come out and declare the cave of the bones to be the powerful among the powerful? G wanted to ask those questions, but before he could give them voice, the strange one went on with his explanation.

"This is the secret place, you see. This is the place that only the wisest of the wise have ever known about. It's the place that can only be found by the greatest and most advanced of all the knowledge seekers." And as he said it, a smile spread across his face. The smile of one who knows himself to be among that great and exalted few to whom he has just referred. The smile of one who knows himself to be so far above the whole human fray that he gazes down upon mere humanity.

And the moment G saw that smile spread across the strange one's face, he had to suppress the urge to laugh out loud. Because the sight of that god-like smile appearing upon the

face of such a homely and pathetic-looking example of the human species was so totally hilarious. It was so incongruous and so far removed from the reality of who and what this guy was. This loser, this outcast, this bundle of dirt and rags, so gaunt and underweight that he looked more like a stick-figure than he did a human being. This guy who must never have seen himself in a mirror, but who was now claiming to be one of the chosen few. One of the leading lights, one of the elite, perhaps even a living godhead. Why, it was just too ridiculous for words.

As G fought the urge to laugh in the guy's face, the strange one finally returned from his lofty perch and, assuming a quieter and more serious expression, he spoke to G once again. "I suppose there's only one way to find out whether or not you truly belong, and that's to introduce you to the power-place. Or should I say to reintroduce you, but to do it the right way this time, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I suppose..."

G didn't know what the guy was driving at, though he soon found out as the strange one launched into a long, drawn-out explanation about how a person should behave when approaching a place of great power. And as it became clear that he intended to take G to the cave and expose him to its so-called powers, his explanation gradually turned into a series of detailed instructions. He told G that he would have to leave the tools exactly where they were since to take them any closer would surely offend the spirits of the cave while to take them further away would be to patronize those spirits. In addition, he told G not to make the least sound and not to look up or look around. He told him that he wasn't high enough up on whatever scale it was that he was using. He told him that if he were to look up, he would offend the powers that inhabit the place. Instead, he would have to be meek and humble before those powers. He would have to acknowledge his true place. And most of all, he would have to do exactly as he was told.

Throughout the explanation, G did nothing but nod his head from time to time and occasionally mutter things like "Right" and "Okay." And while he knew that the whole thing was a lot of nonsense, still he told himself that he had played along this far, so why not keep going? Why not follow this guy all the way to the cave and see what this stuff was all about? And that way, even if he learned nothing at all at the cave, at least he was sure that afterward, he'd know enough about the guy's ideas and beliefs to be able to tell him off for real. To show him up for the fool that he was.

So when the strange one finally declared that it was time to go, pronouncing G fully prepared to meet the powers of the cave in the proper spirit, G was more than willing to go along with him and see what there was to see. He was ready to go, and he was even ready to follow instructions. He was ready to humor this ass as he led the way to where, supposedly, the secrets of the ages would be revealed—and where in reality this guy would be exposing himself and his ideas to the total ridicule they deserved.

The strange one turned and told G to follow him—Eyes on the ground! Don't look up!—and the two of them began to walk slowly up the trail. And he muttered a series of nonsense sounds as they went along, sounds that he had earlier explained were words and phrases from some language of the ancients that only he was still capable of speaking. Words that, whether they actually meant anything in any language or not, he pronounced with a distinctly English

accent. He muttered and he droned, and the further they went along the trail—the more closely they approached the cave—the more the sounds he made flowed and merged together into a continuous stream until finally they became a steady and repetitious chant.

When they reached the very mouth of the cave, the place where the bottom tiers of an ancient stone wall that had once enclosed the innermost part of the cave were barely visible above the ground, the strange one spoke in English to tell G to be seated and to remind him to be silent and keep his head down. And then once G had sat down cross-legged on the remains of the wall, the strange one resumed his chanting while at the same time rummaging around in the heavily worn bag that he carried slung across his shoulder.

He rummaged around, and it sounded to G like he was pulling something out of the bag—Don't look up!—but G dropped his head back down before he could see what it was. And so he sat with his eyes focused on the ground beneath him and listened to the strange one moan and drone and chant his nonsense sounds in that annoyingly off-key pitch of his.

G thought he could hear the guy waving something around or holding it up and shaking it—Head down! Eyes on the ground!!—but once again, he dropped his head before he could see what it was. And with this latest reprimand, he finally gave up on trying to see what was going on around him, and instead he sat and stared at the ground just as he'd been told. He sat and he listened, and rather than his eyes, it was his mind that he let wander here and there, wherever it might choose to go.

And where it chose to wander was into a sort of dreamy state, one very much like the state it often entered just before he fell asleep. It wandered about through other times and other places, sometimes calling up scenes from his past and other times calling up scenes from his imagination. And on a few occasions, it even wandered back to the place where he sat cross-legged on the edge of the cave. It wandered through the air, soaring or floating like a bird as it saw fit, and it wandered across land and sea. It wandered through landscapes and locales that he'd seen at some time and through others he was yet to see and through still others that he would never see. It wandered so far and so wide, through past and through future, that soon he was beginning to forget all about where he was. And he was even beginning to forget about who he was.

He was starting to lose track of that thing he'd always called himself. He was fading into nothing and no one, into a sort of dimensionless blip floating freely through space and time and mind. He was drifting slowly but surely away from that person called G. And it wasn't until after the strange one had tapped him on the shoulder and then tapped him again and told him it was time to go that he finally returned to himself. He returned to that body and that mind which seemed so familiar and yet at the same time so strange. So constraining and so ill-fitting.

G returned more and more fully to himself as he followed the strange one back down the trail to the place where they had first met. And as he went along, he asked himself what had just happened. Had he fallen asleep, and had he been dreaming? Or had he actually been through some kind of near-mystical experience? He didn't know. It had all been far too strange for him to sort out in that short walk back. But whatever the case may have been, the one thing he knew for certain was that his attitude toward the strange one had just gone through a radical reassessment.

Because he no longer felt the least desire to ridicule the guy or laugh in his face, and instead he found growing within him a begrudging respect for the man and his ideas. He no longer thought of the guy as a living, breathing joke, and he even found that he might be starting to like the odd duck. At least a little bit.

“Yes, I was right about you,” the strange one pronounced the moment they had arrived back at the place where they’d begun. “You’re one of us, and not just any one, either, because you have a tremendous potential. Why, you could become one of the great ones, one of the leaders of all the leading lights.”

“Yeah...?” G’s voice was completely passive now as all the fight had gone out of him.

“Not that you’ll ever reach *my* level, of course,” he said without the least hint of irony or even a sign that he was conscious of just how ridiculous and conceited the statement sounded. “But if you were to receive the proper guidance, there’d be no telling how far you might go.” Here he paused and awaited a reply, but then failing to receive one, he continued with his thought. “And of course that means it’s up to me to teach you and guide you. Me who found you approaching this power-place and who introduced you to it. It’s up to me to become your teacher.”

“My teacher...?”

“Yes, because it was the Call that brought you here, and it brought you to *me*. And even if you had no idea what the Call was when you heard it, still you followed it. You came to this place, and you came at this time. This most fortunate of all times.” Once again, the strange one paused for a reply, and once again, he failed to receive one. “Yes, it’s the most fortunate time and the most fortunate place of all to enter into the Way. Because you’re just in time for the Great Event that’s about to take place right here.”

“The Great Event? Here...? On Menorca...?”

“Yes, the Great Event. The greatest of them all! Because the Great Convergence is about to take place, and it’s about to take place right here on this island. And I’m not talking about one of those little hundred-year convergences or anything like that. No, I’m talking about a thousand-year convergence that’s about to take place. I’m talking about a Great Convergence with a capital G and a capital C.”

G had no idea what the guy was talking about, so his only reply was a sort of mumbled, “Really...?”

“It’s the Great Convergence of all the forces of the universe,” the strange one went on. “It’s the coming together of all the forces that run the world, all the forces of the True Way and the True Religion. And when I say True Religion, I’m talking about the one that our ancestors worshipped back before the Middle Eastern Superstition arrived in these lands and covered them with its veil of darkness and ignorance. I’m talking about the coming together of all the forces and all the knowledge and wisdom and understanding that exist throughout the universe. I’m talking about the coming together of all the forces that can lead us to the state of Enlightenment.”

Enlightenment? What was this guy doing? G asked himself. Was he mixing a little Buddhism in with his Paganism? Was he mixing and matching his concepts? Before he could say a thing, though, the strange one answered him as though he had been reading his thoughts.

“Yes, I use the word Enlightenment here, and I use it in much the same way that the Hindus and Buddhists use it. I use it in the way that those diluted and impoverished descendants of the True Religion still use it, though of course I use it in a way that’s much closer to the true meaning than they do.”

G was at a loss for how to respond to that rather outrageous assertion, so all he did was mumble a generic affirmation before the strange one went on with what he had to say. And as it turned out, he had a lot to say. He had a whole big, long-winded story about the Old Ones and their Great Teachers and about the True Religion they created. About the mystical forces that control the world and about the proper way to honor those forces, the way to worship them and perhaps even harness them. And once he had finished with that subject, he began to explain his own version of the story behind the erection of the *taules* and the other ancient structures on the island. He explained their “true” meaning and their “true” significance—and that’s not to mention his explanation of the “true” meaning of Stonehenge and a few other sites.

He went on and on, saying things that G surely would have laughed at a little while earlier, though by this time, he was far beyond laughter. Because all he could do now was to occasionally mutter in agreement as the flood of strange facts and ideas poured in upon him. And while they came at him so fast and so furiously that most of them bounced right off, there were a few that managed to penetrate G’s shell-shocked brain. A few ideas and a few vague notions. And it was only after stating emphatically that the time the time was short—that the Great Convergence was nearly at hand!—that the strange one finally fell into silence.

G stood in a state of near total bewilderment, his eyes glazed over and his jaw hanging slack as the strange one made a move to leave. At the sight, G raised his hand unconsciously. He raised it as though to shake hands or to wave goodbye. And seeing the hand go up in that way, the strange one returned to G and, grasping him by both shoulders, he gave his entire body a shake. Then taking a half-step back, he spoke once again. “By the way, my name is Jeband.”

“Jeband...?” G wasn’t sure that he was pronouncing it correctly.

“It means Truth-Seeker in the language of the Old Ones.”

“Oh, uh... Well, my name is G.”

“G, which I suppose must mean G, doesn’t it?” Jeband responded in a weak attempt at dry British humor. And with that, he turned and was on his way.

G stood watching for some time after Jeband had disappeared from sight. He stood and tried to work things out in his so-recently-besieged and still-benumbed mind. He stood and asked himself if everything he’d just seen, heard and felt could possibly have been for real, or had it been some sort of weird illusion. Had he really met some strange character named Jeband? And had he really experienced what he thought he had up at the cave of the bones? And if all that had been for real, then did that mean the Great Convergence was real, too? Did it mean that some

miraculous, thousand-year event was about to take place right here on Menorca? And did it mean that he was going to be a witness to it?

G was so caught up in his thoughts that he was practically in a trance during the entire walk back to the house. And it was only when he came upon one of M's good-looking sisters just outside the house that he was finally shaken back to reality. "*Que has trobat avui?*" she asked him. What had he found today?

"*Res,*" he shot back. Nothing. And it was only at that moment that he realized he was returning with an empty basket and no explanation for his sudden lack of success. No explanation for why the basket was empty today rather than being filled with the jewelry and other artifacts he usually carried with him when he returned from the cave. So as he put the basket and tools away, and as he went in to wash up and prepare for the big midday meal that would soon be ready, he searched about for some way to describe his day's adventures.

He knew instinctively that it would be a bad idea to tell the family about the odd character he'd met skulking around the farm. And he knew that if he were to mention Jeband, then not only would he have to go through the long and perhaps difficult process of convincing them that the guy was truly harmless, but he might have to go into his own experiences at the cave of the bones as well. Experiences that he couldn't explain even to himself at that moment, let alone trying to describe them to others. So instead of dealing with the truth, he soon decided that his best course of action would be to come up with a cover-story.

And G had his story all ready to go by the time he went out to take his place, along with a dozen or so others, at the long table that stretched along the over-sized porch over-looking the garden. He knew exactly what he would say, and so when the time rolled around, when someone asked him about his luck at the cave that day, he launched right into his story. He told them that on his way to the cave, he had decided not to dig that day after all. He told them that instead, he had decided to go for a hike out into the parts of the farm that he seldom visited. And while everyone quickly took him at his word, he did have a few anxious moments when M's father began to question him about his exact itinerary. Because while the father knew the entire farm like the back of his hand, G's knowledge of much of it was a lot more sketchy. And in the end, it was only by going along and agreeing with whatever details the father provided that G was able to maintain his story.

After dinner, though, when G and M were in their room alone, he had to unburden himself and tell her the truth. Because he had never lied to her before, and he wasn't about to start then. So in that room, he told her everything, or almost everything. He told her about Jeband and about some of the things he had said, and he even told her about the Old Ones and about the Great Convergence. And the only thing he left out was the part about what had happened to him when he and Jeband had gone to the cave. Because that part of the story was way too complex and it was way too fresh. It still needed a lot more digestion before he would ever be able to tell her about it.

But he could see as he watched the look in her beautiful green eyes that M hardly knew how to take it when she heard the whole incredible story as she seemed to have found his cover-story to be far more believable than this one. And while she soon came to take him at his word

about the existence of Jeband, living somewhere out there in the woods near the cave, she refused to accept any of the mystico-babble part of the story. And in fact, to her it seemed more likely than not that Jeband—and perhaps even G—had spent far too much time walking around in the hot sun.

At least she agreed with G on the most important part of what he had to say, though, the part about the need to keep Jeband's presence a secret from her parents since it would only upset them needlessly to hear that there was a stranger lurking about and living in the forest nearby. She agreed that there was no point in getting them all excited when that stranger was nothing but the harmless eccentric that Jeband appeared to be.

* * * * *

The next morning, G was on his way back to the cave. He had left the house quietly and unobtrusively that day, avoiding everyone's eyes except M's so as not to be forced into lying again about his destination or his intentions. And he had left his digging tools behind, too, since he didn't want to offend whatever spirits he might come across. Instead, he walked the trail empty-handed, following it across the fields he always crossed and hopping or dodging the stone fences he always passed before heading up into the forest to the spot where he had met Jeband the previous day. When he got there, though, it was only to find that his "teacher" was nowhere in sight.

Where could the guy be? he asked himself. Because while they hadn't actually said anything the day before about meeting here again, same time same place, he felt that Jeband had at least implied as much with the stuff he'd said about the time of the Great Convergence being so near. And now finding that Jeband wasn't there, G had to ask himself what he should do next. Should he stand around and wait? Or should he go out and look for the guy? And if he decided to go search for him, then where exactly should he begin looking?

Unsure of what course to take, he stood and waited, and he waited some more and still some more. And then finally when his patience had begun to run thin, he decided that maybe he should follow the other option instead. Maybe he should set out in search of Jeband. So to that end, he started walking along the small cross-trail up which Jeband had disappeared the day before. He followed the trail until it joined another larger trail, and then he began to follow that new trail. And he followed it until he came to a branch, then a short time later, he took another cross-trail, then a branch and another branch and a short-cut and a cross-trail. And it was only after he'd followed so many different trails that he was starting to lose his sense of direction that G finally spotted something in a small clearing nearby. Something that looked like a heap of stained and tattered blankets laying on the ground.

So this is his campsite, G told himself. But where exactly is Jeband? And it wasn't until after he had entered the clearing and approached the blankets that he became aware of the fact that there was a slight noise coming from somewhere beneath that pile. There was the soft and gentle sound of someone lightly snoring, the sound of Jeband still sound asleep even at this late hour and even after G's far-less-than-stealthy approach. There was the sound of Jeband calmly and contentedly sleeping the day away.

G began to ask himself what to do now. Should he go away and come back later? Or should he wait there until Jeband awakened? Or should he...? But then all at once, G's questions were answered for him when Jeband shoved the blankets off his head and upper body and sat up looking around with a dazed expression on his face. And though he looked right at G as he surveyed his campsite, he gave no sign of having recognized him or even of having seen him. It wasn't long before he tossed the filth-encrusted blankets the rest of the way off his body, and with that, he struggled rather awkwardly to his feet.

He came out fully dressed in the same dirty clothes he'd been wearing the day before and, after wadding up the worn and discolored blankets and shoving them aside, he walked a few steps over to the edge of the clearing where he stopped to take a long pee onto one of the bushes. When he was done with that, he returned to his camp where he opened a small sack and reached inside with his unwashed hands and then, pulling out a handful of seeds and nuts and dried fruits, he shoveled them into his mouth and began to chew away. And it wasn't until after he'd sloppily downed several handfuls of that mix that he finally acknowledged G's silent presence by holding some of it out to him in one of his filthy hands and inquiring with his eyes if G wanted any.

"No thanks," G shot back automatically at the stomach-turning sight. But then so as not to offend the guy, he quickly added, "I already ate a big breakfast." And with that, Jeband resumed stuffing his mouth with food.

G felt as though the ice had now been broken, which meant that it was time for him to start up the day's conversation. So after waiting for a moment when Jeband's mouth was relatively empty, he threw out what he thought was an innocuous little starter. "You must have been up late last night, I suppose."

"No..." was the answer Jeband gave, and he said it in a tone that showed he had no idea what G was talking about.

"I mean to have slept as late as you did, and so soundly, too."

"No..." Jeband said once again, slurring it out through the wad of food that he'd just crammed into his mouth. And he said it in the same uncomprehending way as he'd spoken before. He said it as though nothing G was saying made any sense to him at all. As though the whole idea of there being some connection between staying up late and sleeping late was so alien to him that he couldn't even conceive it.

After that non-response, G held his tongue and let the discussion die back out. Because how could he hold any type of normal conversation with someone who was operating on such a totally different frequency from the rest of us? He couldn't. And if he couldn't talk to him like a normal human being, then what could he do but sit back and wait for Jeband to begin speaking on his own. Wait for him to begin speaking about whatever it was that interested him in that strange mental world he inhabited.

So G sat down and waited, and he watched as the other chewed away with bovine gracelessness. Then after a time, Jeband broke the silence. "It's not today," he said as small particles of food flew from his over-stuffed mouth. "Soon, very soon. But not today." And after

pausing long enough to shove still more food inside, he continued just a bit further. “Tomorrow, I think.”

“Oh yeah?” G didn’t want to encourage the guy to say more until after he had finished his mouth, because the fact is that he was pretty disgusting to watch. So G didn’t say another word until after Jeband had put away his bag of food and taken a big swig of water from a dirt-stained plastic jug, and after he’d chewed that liquid and swallowed it and then taken another swig and chewed some more. Because it was only then, when his mouth seemed to be reasonably empty, that G finally dared to speak to him again. “So it’s gonna be tomorrow, huh? Is that what you say?”

“I think,” Jeband replied bluntly. “But it’s not today.”

And with that response, G turned to asking himself why the hell he was there that day if nothing was going to happen. Why was he sitting there watching that awful slob? And why didn’t he just take off and come back the next day when something might actually happen? Before he had a chance to speak up and ask his questions, though, Jeband’s voice broke into his thoughts.

“We have work to do today,” he said. “We have to search out the Others.”

“The Others? What are you talking about?”

“The Called. The Chosen. We have to find them. We have to see who else is here, and that way we’ll know.”

“Know...? We’ll know what?”

“We’ll know when the Great Event is to take place, of course. And we might even know where.” And he said it in a sort of scolding tone, one like a teacher might use when reprimanding a dull student.

“So we’ll go talk to them and...?”

“No! Of course not!!” And with that, Jeband’s tone became one of open castigation. Because how could anyone be so stupid as to ask a question like that? How could anyone think that you spoke to the Chosen when you wanted to gather information? How could anyone be so ignorant?

But the fact is that G was precisely that ignorant. He had no idea who the Chosen were, let alone knowing how to communicate with them if not by asking them what you wanted to know. And as he searched his teacher’s cold blue eyes for some sort of explanation, he saw them staring back at him in silent but unmistakable reproach. And it was only after Jeband had glared at him for what seemed like several minutes that the strange one finally broke the hard silence by barking out a single word, “Come!” And with that, he stood up and began to head off down the trail in a direction that led away from M’s parents’ house and not in the direction of the old farmhouse, either. Instead, it was one that headed off in the direction of town.

G did as he was told and followed meekly behind, feeling cowed by this severe and humorless master of his, and he uttered not a single word during the entire walk. Because he didn't want to arouse any more disapproval, and the only way he knew to avoid doing so was by saying nothing and doing exactly as he was told, whether that command came to him by word or by gesture.

The two of them walked through fields and forests that G had never seen before, hopping over or passing through the gates of several stone fences along the way as they crossed land that obviously belonged to another farm or farms. And while G feared the reaction if he were to speak up and voice his concerns out loud, he repeated to himself over and over again that he hoped they wouldn't be spotted by anyone as the trespassers they were. And it wasn't until after they had hopped one final stone fence and come out onto a small dirt road leading into town that he was finally able to put his apprehensions to rest.

Things were quiet on the little side-street through which they entered town, quiet the way they were every day in that anonymous little town so far from the beaches or other tourist sites. Or that is, things were quiet this way every day except during the town's annual *festa*. But with the *festa* having already come and gone a couple weeks earlier, the town had long since returned to its sleepy little self. Nothing but three main roads slicing through narrow gaps between the white-washed buildings of the town and converging upon the central square, and little more besides that than some half-dozen even narrower side-streets. And as always, most of the action in town that day centered around the traffic flowing along those three main streets, especially along the two that formed part of the island's main East-West highway, though there was also some traffic along the one that headed out in the direction of the northern coast. And as the two of them approached the bigger roads and the main square from their little street, the pedestrian traffic initially seemed no heavier than usual, either.

"There's one," Jeband said suddenly as he indicated a rather shriveled and bent though otherwise nondescript-looking little tourist some distance ahead. "Act like you don't see him," he continued in a whisper as the two of them approached. But the little man didn't follow their lead as no sooner had he seen them coming than he turned and fled as fast as his crooked little legs could carry him. "I hadn't expected to see him here," was Jeband's final comment about the man, said in a bemused voice that clarified nothing for his student.

Soon, Jeband was pointing out others, some of them old and some young, some male and some female, and while many of them looked fairly normal, standing out only in that they had the unmistakable look of tourists, there were a number of them who looked a bit odd, some nearly as odd as Jeband himself. And then there were a few among them who looked so strange that to call them oddballs or losers would be an insult to the oddballs and losers of the world. They were people who looked so completely weird that even Jeband seemed normal alongside them.

When they reached the center of town, G saw that it was practically filled with these people, and the sight of them made him wonder what the locals could be thinking about all this. Because they weren't used to having so many tourists in town all at once. People usually just passed through there on their way to somewhere else, and most of them passed through without stopping. So what could the locals possibly be thinking about this mass of humanity that had

suddenly invaded their town? And especially when a part of that mass was made up of people who looked like the outcasts and rejects of society, perhaps even its very dregs.

Jeband seemed not to notice the few locals they passed along the street, though, since those locals were not among the so-called Chosen. Instead, he focused all his attention upon the Chosen Ones. And with each of them he saw, he came up with a different reaction, as with some, he whispered to G to ignore them, while with others, he exchanged nods or various types of hand-signals, signals that had nothing to do with any normal signs of greeting. And there were even a few with whom he exchanged more effusive greetings, patting them on the chests or shoulders or bumping foreheads with them, though there was not one of them that he grabbed and shook in the way he had done with G the day before. And another thing he didn't do was to speak with any of them, while none of them said a word to him either. And even those who were engaged in conversation fell silent when he made his approach, resuming their discussions only after he had gone.

After the two of them had been down all the main streets and most of the minor ones, having reached the far edge of town on the main road heading East, Jeband stopped and turned to G. "Yes, they're here," he said. "Almost all of them." But from the way he emphasized the word almost, it seemed to G that he didn't sound totally convinced. It sounded like he was still looking for someone else. Someone or someones.

By now, G was beginning to feel a bit braver, feeling as though he might be ready to risk incurring the great man's wrath by asking him another question. And seeing how the look on Jeband's face had mellowed so noticeably during their stroll through town, he decided that this might be a good time to try to clear up exactly what this guy meant when he used the word almost. "So is it tomorrow?"

"I think..." Jeband answered in an indefinite and non-committal tone, though one that had an air of finality to it.

"And, uh..." G saw that it would be a waste of time to continue on with that subject, so instead he tried another question, one that had been gnawing at him ever since they had arrived in town and seen the crowds of people hanging about. "So why is it that everyone's here in Mercadal? Why is it that they're all gathering in this little town and not somewhere else?"

"Because this town is in the center of the island, of course. So it's the only place to gather when the exact site of the Great Event is still unknown."

"Oh..." G replied in a voice that did nothing to conceal his surprise. Because after everything he'd seen of Jeband and everything he'd heard come out of his mouth, the very last thing he had been expecting at that moment had been an answer that sounded so simple and so logical. And he asked himself if perhaps Jeband had just joined the world of reason, if his stroll through town and his contact with so many other human beings had somehow brought him back to reality. But before G could take advantage of this new and seemingly reasonable Jeband by asking him another, deeper, more meaningful question, all at once, he saw the guy's eyes go shooting up the street. And he saw those eyes light up at the sight of what had to be that missing someone he had still been searching for.

G turned to look in the direction where Jeband's eyes now pointed, and when he did so, it was only to be met with one of the least pleasant sights he'd ever seen. Because walking down the street toward them came a truly repulsive-looking example of the human species. He was a fat slob with long, greasy hair framing his ugly face, and with his whole bloated body shaking and jiggling each time he took a step, each time he mercilessly stomped a foot down upon the poor, innocent sidewalk. And with each of his pounding steps, with each jarring quiver of his flaccid and over-inflated body, puffs of dirt seemed to rise up from his filthy clothes, leaving a small cloud of dust floating along in his wake. As he made his approach, a horrible stench began to assault G's nostrils, a stench that grew stronger with each step the fat one took. A stench so powerful that it even penetrated upwind in the direction where G stood. And by the time the guy had reached the spot where the two of them stood waiting for him, the stink had become so overpowering—the stink of someone who hadn't bathed or changed his clothes in years, and perhaps hadn't even wiped himself—G could barely prevent himself from gagging.

But whatever G's reaction may have been, Jeband was delighted to see the guy. And when the fat one got close enough, Jeband reached out and grasped him by the shoulders and gave him a shake just like the one he had given to G the day before. When he was done with that, the fat one reached out and patted him on the tops of the shoulders and nodded his head in some significant way. And then when that gesture was finished, it was Jeband's turn to grab the guy and shake him once again before standing back to let the guy pat him and nod at him, after which he shook the guy yet again and so on. The two of them took turns greeting each other over and over again, each doing so in his own peculiar way, and during the entire time they were together, during the many long minutes they spent on their greetings—minutes, or were they hours?—there was not a single word that passed between them.

Finally when they had finished, and when the fat one had turned and walked off out of earshot, Jeband spoke up in an excited but supremely confident voice. "Yes, it's tomorrow. That's for sure."

"So you're positive?"

"Yes, Ramal is here!" And he said it as though it were the most obvious explanation in the world, as though a statement like that couldn't possibly require any further elaboration. Because Ramal's presence meant that the Great Event would take place the next day, and that was all there was to it. End of subject. So it was in silence that the two of them now began to walk back up the street in the direction from which they had originally come. A silence that was intensely contemplative on Jeband's part, though at the same time, one that was exalted and euphoric, perhaps even giddy. Because the moment was near at hand, all the pieces were in place, and there only remained a single day before the Great Event was to occur. The Great Convergence, the great thousand-year coming-together of all the forces of the universe. The Great Event that was about to take place right there, right before his eyes—right there within him, within his very being.

It wasn't until the two of them had reached the northern edge of town, the edge nearest the farm and the house where G was staying, that G finally broke into Jeband's reverie by asking a question he felt compelled to ask. Because he knew it was time for him to take his leave and head off for the big midday meal that was about to be served up at the house. His stomach was

telling him that very clearly. But before he left, there was something he just had to know. “There’s one thing I don’t get. And that’s the way you never said a word to Ramal or anyone else we saw today. But with me, you talk a lot and tell me all sorts of stuff.”

“Yes, I do!” was Jeband’s reply. And he said it in such an eloquent tone, one that carried reprimand nearly to the point of scorn, that he seemed to be saying everything there was to say on the subject with that one short phrase. As with those words, he was laying the blame for his verbosity entirely upon G. He was blaming it upon this unenlightened one who was incapable of understanding him when he tried to communicate upon any higher plane.

And it was only after a long pause, at a moment when G was about to say goodbye, or perhaps just wave before heading off for the big meal that awaited him, that Jeband finally broke his silence and spoke up one last time. “Have you got a car?” he asked abruptly.

“A car? Yeah, sure...” Because he and M had brought their car over on the ferry when they’d come to the island.

“Well, we’re going to need it tomorrow morning. Right here, at first light.”

“I don’t know if I can...” G began, not wanting to make promises about the use of a car that was only half his.

But Jeband had his own set of priorities, and he cut him off in mid-sentence. “We *need* it!”

“Yeah, right, but first I have to...”

“We *need* it, I tell you!!”

“Okay, sure, I’ll uh... I’ll have it here.”

“Tomorrow at first light. Right here!”

“Tomorrow, right...” And before G could say another word, Jeband reached out and gave him a good, hard shake and then turned and went on his way back toward the center of town, or perhaps toward the small street that would take him to his campsite.

So once again, G found himself walking back to the house with no company but his own. And while he was in nothing like the daze he had been in the day before, still there was much for him to think over as he made the long walk. Like for instance, who were all those people in town really? Where had they come from, and how did they live when they weren’t gathering together for big events? And how had they all heard about the event that was supposed to take place the next day? Had it been through some sort of cultural-underground word-of-mouth? Or had they actually learned about it through the esoteric means that Jeband seemed to imply?

And then what about Jeband himself? Who was he in reality and how did he live and where? And why was it that G was so willing to put up with his repeated verbal abuse? Surely it had nothing to do with his magnetic personality or his good looks, given that he possessed

neither. And given the way he so constantly hacked and slashed away at G's already fragile sense of self-worth, it was hard to say why he didn't just walk away and forget about the asshole. But no, he found himself strangely drawn to the guy and perhaps even to his ideas. Because Jeband was different. He was interesting. And as far as his ideas went, they at least had the advantage that they would soon be put to the test and proven in one way or the other. That either the next day, G would be there to witness a great, once-in-a-millennium experience, or he would be there for nothing. For a fizzle, not a bang. And if he wanted to find out which of the two it would be, why he had only to wait one more day.

Back at the house and back at the long, extended table on the porch, G quickly found that his hopes of keeping a low profile that day had proven a miserable failure, because the talk around the table turned almost immediately to the situation in Mercadal which a number of family-members had passed through that morning on their way to-and-from the beaches. None of them had ever seen anything like it before with so many tourists hanging around that little town. And they were especially struck by how strange some of those strangers appeared to be. Then before long, one of them mentioned that she'd seen G in town that day, walking along with some extravagant-looking type with blonde hair, and no sooner had she said it than all eyes were upon G, looking to him for some sort of explanation.

M quickly came to his rescue, though, asking him if they might be referring to that guy he had mentioned to her earlier, that aging English hippie who had wanted to talk about the *taules* and the *talaiots*. And with a nod of gratitude to his pretty and petite co-conspirator, G followed her lead and said that had to be the guy all right. That strange character he'd come across on the way to town. But what was he doing there? someone asked. G didn't know because so many of the things the guy had said hadn't made a lot of sense. And who were all the others? the questioning continued. G had no idea. He hadn't spoke a word with any of them, he answered more-or-less truthfully. And in that way, the conversation went on, with the family asking their questions, and with G dodging them as artfully as he could. With him doing his best to avoid the necessity of going into things he wasn't yet ready to explain. Things he would perhaps never be able to explain.

* * * * *

G rolled into town the next morning in the grey light of early dawn. He hadn't slept well that night, tossing and turning and waking up every half hour or so—and waking M, too—as he had repeatedly checked the alarm clock to see how much time there was left before he had to get up. But his insomnia that night hadn't been caused solely by his sense of anticipation over the events of the big day that lay ahead, because at the same time as he was enjoying that anticipation, he was also suffering from a sense of guilt over his actions of the previous afternoon. His guilt for having misled the family, and having misled M, too, through the things he had failed to tell them. And why had he done it? For what reason? He really couldn't say. Because while he had had a good, solid reason for lying and misleading them when it came to Jeband, what with the guy camping out on family land over near the cave of the bones, there was no reason for him to have lied about much of the rest of what he knew. No reason but his own laziness and his desire to avoid getting dragged into a long and complicated discussion about things he didn't understand himself.

So he had avoided the subject as well as he could. And even later when he had spoken with M in private, explaining to her why he would be needing the car the next day, he had left some big gaps in the story he'd told her. He had left a number of things out, in effect lying to her through omission. And then that night in bed, he had found himself paying the price of his dishonesty.

But he was wide awake by the time he reached town, awake and ready for the soon-to-occur Great Event. And his nerves were so much on edge that he nearly tingled with anticipation as he drove through the eerily silent town, and as upon spotting his ghostly-looking passenger, he pulled over to let the apparition climb in. This passenger whose nervous condition turned out to be so extreme that he made even G's look like nothing, because Jeband was so wound up and so excited that he was in a state of near-hysteria by the time he opened the passenger door and jumped inside.

"Where have you been?! What took you so long? I told you first light, didn't I?!" he yelled in open accusation as he pointed toward the sky with its dim first light. "We have to get going, and we have to go now! We can't lose any more time. We have to be there!!" But then after a short pause for air, he suddenly blurted out, "Where's Ramal?!"

"Ramal...?" G didn't know anything about Ramal, and he hadn't even known he was supposed to give the guy a ride, so how could he possibly answer a question like that?

"Stop the car!! We have to find him!" Jeband yelled, and then even before the car had come to a complete halt, he was leaping out the door and charging up and down the deserted streets of the sleeping town. He was running everywhere there was to go, and he was moving so fast that G could barely follow him with his eyes. And it was only after he had run for what had to be miles that he finally came to a stop near the car and stood trying to catch his breath.

"Where... could he... be?" he gasped out between gulps of air. But then after a minute or two of standing hunched over with his hands resting on his thighs like an athlete who has just completed a marathon, all at once, his ears seemed to perk up. And with a quick wave of his hand for G to follow, he was off like a shot once again.

He was soon out of sight around a corner, though by the time G had reached that corner, he too could hear the sound that must have caught Jeband's attention. He could hear a sort of rumbling, sawing noise, and as he set off to follow it to its source, the sound grew louder and more distinct until it began to take on the unmistakable timbre of human snores. And not just any snores, either, but the loudest, most grating, most obnoxious snores he'd ever heard in his life. Snores so horrendous that they could only be coming from one person: Ramal.

Then as he turned a final corner, one that led to a small, hidden alcove on one side of an alley, G came upon the sight of Ramal himself. He saw him lying there stretched out on his back, sound asleep with his mouth wide open. And from that mouth came an awful racket, one so loud that it seemed to rattle the very walls. Meanwhile, standing over Ramal was Jeband who repeatedly bent over and grasped his shoulders and shook. Shook him as hard as he could, it seemed, though for all the shaking he did, he was having no effect upon Ramal. Because in spite of Jeband's best efforts, Ramal's ear-splitting snores went on in the same slow, steady rhythm.

After awhile, Jeband appeared to give up on awakening his friend through any normal, gentle means, and he began to kick the guy on the bottoms of his feet. He kicked him over and over again, but all he accomplished with his kicking was to make Ramal curl up his legs and roll over to one side. So finally out of desperation, Jeband turned to an even tougher tactic, one in which he reached down and pinched Ramal's nose shut with one hand while using the other to clamp his mouth shut. And with his hands grasping tightly in that way and cutting off the guy's air supply, it was only a matter of seconds before Ramal's eyes came flying open and he lurched awake with his arms and legs flailing about in a struggle for oxygen.

Ramal calmed down quickly once Jeband had released his grip, though, and it wasn't long before a dazed and still-sleepy expression moved in to replace the look of panic that had so recently covered his face. But with Jeband jumping around in front of him and flashing one hand-signal after another, he soon began to respond to the urgency of the situation. He rolled over and struggled to get to his hands-and-knees, and then after an even greater effort, he managed to get all the way to his feet. And finally, he set out following ploddingly along behind Jeband's jackrabbit-quick lead, following all the way out to where the car stood in wait.

Jeband jumped into the passenger's seat and waved frantically for G to get in and get going. And in his nervous excitement, he failed to notice that Ramal had yet to squeeze into the backseat of the car, an undertaking that turned out to be far more difficult than it might have been with most other people. Because Ramal was big and awkward and the car was small, so it was only after a long, hard struggle and a lot of pushing and prying on the part of G, along with much grunting and groaning on the part of Ramal, that they ever managed to stuff Ramal's entire body into that little car. And then once he was in and the back door had been jammed and crammed until it closed, G was finally able to run around and take his place in the driver's seat. And climbing in at last, still out of breath from his recent efforts, he found himself being greeted with a withering rebuke on the part of Jeband. "Finally, you're here!! You have to be the slowest person I've ever met!" So it was upon that happy note that the three of them were finally on their way, driving off to what they hoped would be their great adventure.

G slid his window open the first chance he got, and he leaned over toward it as he drove along, trying to find breathable air in a car that had quickly become inundated with the unbearable stink of Ramal. And the car hadn't just become filled with that stink, either, but rather it had become completely permeated with it. The car and everything in it—the lining, the seats, the floor mats, perhaps even the steel structure of the body, and that's not to mention G and the clothes he was wearing—everything had absorbed that awful smell, everything had become saturated with it. And it wasn't long before G quietly resigned himself to the fact that, try as he might, he would never be able to get rid of the stink altogether. That from that day forward, it would be a permanent part of the car. His car and poor, unfortunate M's with her highly developed sense of smell.

As they drove out of town and headed West, Jeband soon began to bark out orders and directions, and they were orders which he expected to have obeyed immediately whether G thought it possible for him to do so or not. Because what did a stone fence or two matter to Jeband when his inner voice was telling him that it was time to turn now? And he couldn't understand G's resistance at all, his insistence upon waiting until there was an actual road before making the turn. Hadn't he said to turn back there? At that precise spot. And when G didn't do

exactly as he was told, it made a mess of Jeband's entire sense of direction. And then there was another thing that was throwing him off, too, that being Ramal who, in following the dictates of his own sense of direction, repeatedly tapped the driver on the shoulder and pointed insistently in one direction or another. A direction that was almost invariably in conflict with the direction that Jeband wanted to go.

Like for instance, there was one time when Jeband yelled at G to "Turn left here! Turn now!!" while at the same time, Ramal pointed just as emphatically for G to continue on straight ahead. And then after Jeband had come to realize that he'd made a mistake, and after he had told G to turn around and go back—and after he'd waited for the damned fool to find a place where the road was wide enough for them to actually make the u-turn before doing so—they soon found themselves back at the crossroads. And there the conflict was immediately renewed, because as they pulled up to the corner, Jeband ordered G to turn left and continue on the way they had previously been going while Ramal tapped and pointed urgently to the right, back in the direction from which they had come.

And it went on and on like that, with the two guides offering one conflicting direction after another and with the driver stubbornly refusing to follow those directions until he could do so without sending the car crashing into a stone fence or plunging into a ditch. And at one point, he even had the nerve to talk back and tell them that he wouldn't turn until he could do so safely. So given that situation, it was only to be expected that they would soon become hopelessly lost and disoriented. And it wasn't until after they had passed back through Mercadal and taken the road to the East that some of the confusion finally began to clear up. And it all became clearer and clearer as they continued on in that direction. So clear that it soon reached the point where the two guides began to agree with each other about which directions they should be taking. And not long after that, they even began to agree with the roads and the road-maps, too, as from that point on, they only told G to turn at places where there were actual roads for him to turn down.

But while the conflict between Jeband and Ramal died out as they neared the eastern end of the island, there still appeared to be some small glitch in their sense of direction. Because rather than guiding G toward any one particular place, what the two of them did was they guided him all over everywhere, up highways and down roads and up even smaller roads. They made loop after scenic loop around the eastern part of the island, driving along and back-tracking and then trying another direction, and they crisscrossed their own path time after time, taking so many roads big and small and driving so many kilometers that as the morning wore on, G found himself watching the level in his gas-tank with ever-growing concern.

And it was only after they turned up a small dirt road, one they had already passed any number of times that morning, that the situation finally began to straighten itself out. Because no sooner had they started to drive up that little road leading to one of the most famous *taules* on Menorca than they all felt a growing sense of certainty. And it wasn't just Jeband and Ramal who felt it, either, but it was G as well. They all felt some strange sort of energy that came radiating toward them from somewhere just ahead, an energy that surged and pulsed throughout their bodies. An energy that grew stronger by the second as they proceeded in the direction of the *taula*. It was a huge but subtle energy, one that seemed to penetrate right to their souls, if people can be said to have souls. It was the first mighty waves of the Great Convergence, waves that came crashing all around them, washing over them and washing through them. And there was no

longer any need for speech or guidance as G pulled the car over where a few others had already parked a short distance from the *taula*. And then as he got out of the car, G was the only one among them who felt the need to give voice to the thought that dominated all their minds. “Yes, this is it. This is the place!”

Jeband was gone in a matter of seconds after the car had stopped, charging up to the *taula* where he gazed at it and made near-circuits about it, his progress on one side being checked by a stone fence and a grove of trees. And as he walked around, he nodded or made signs at those Chosen Ones he encountered. G, too, began to walk toward the *taula* almost immediately, drawn there as though by some great power and with his mind floating so quickly away from his body and its day-to-day cares that he was deaf to the sounds of struggle that reached his ears from somewhere just behind him. The sounds of grunts and groans and scrapings and bangings as Ramal fought to extricate himself from the car which still held him fast. Ramal squirmed and pushed and pulled and did whatever he could, but there was no way he could get out of that little metal prison all by himself. And his desperation to escape grew exponentially as he saw that G was beginning to walk away from him. G, the only person who could possibly help him now. So to get the guy’s attention, he made all the noise he could in his struggles. He banged his hands and his feet, and he even tried to honk the horn only to find that the button lay just beyond his reach.

He had to get out of that car! He couldn’t stay in there forever. And with G getting farther and farther away all the time... “Help!! Get me outa here!!! Help me!!!” The words suddenly came flying out of his long-silent mouth, coming from he knew not where. And as they flew out, they did so in the same old New York accent that had come out of that mouth the last time he’d spoken so many years before.

Ramal was finally free after a short but intense and painful struggle, and with that, he and G began to make their approach to the *taula*. That *taula* which was rather squat by Menorcan standards, though it had one of the widest of all the top-pieces, and it also had a second base-piece which had been added at some time in the past to help support the awkward load. And as they walked through the fields toward it, they could feel the energy of that place and that moment. They could feel the energy growing stronger with each step they took. They could feel the energy that seemed to emanate from the giant stones of the *taula*. Or was it from somewhere just above them?

The crowd around the *taula* slowly grew larger and larger as the three of them wandered about and waited impatiently in that place of power. And it wasn’t long before people seemed to be arriving in a steady stream, some of them walking and others in cars that joined G’s in the parking area, cars from local rental agencies and cars that bore foreign plates and even a few local ones. And while G recognized some of the people from his previous day’s walk through Mercadal, there were others he was just as sure he had never seen before.

The crowd near the *taula* was becoming thicker all the time, and it was slowly but steadily expanding outward. And as the members of the crowd became ever more tightly compacted, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to wander about the area as they chose, the human mass gradually began to take on a well-defined form. Or rather, it began to take on a series of well-defined forms, as not only was there a main group of people standing or

moving about uneasily near the *taula*, most of them in the open field though a few having climbed onto the adjacent stone fence or even into the trees just beyond, but there were other, smaller groups coming together as well. Groups that sat down in small rings some distance from the central place of power, and groups that stood in solid blocks with their arms tightly locked or wrapped around each other. And the whole time the groups were coalescing and taking shape, the energy level of the crowd was going nowhere but up.

G could feel his level of consciousness rising higher and higher all the time, being pulled upward by he knew not what. By the energy coming from the *taula* or perhaps by that coming from the crowd. But whatever the source may have been, he was soon rising to heights he had never felt before without the help of mind-altering drugs. And in fact, it wasn't long before he left even those drug-induced highs behind. He felt himself levitating or something like that. He felt himself floating above the crowd, and he saw the shapes and colors before his eyes shifting and blending one into another, and at the same time, he heard strange sounds, strange voices speaking to him in unknown languages.

Ramal, too, quickly succumbed to the power of the scene, and strangely, it was only Jeband who refused to let himself be drawn in. Because rather than joining in and sharing the mass high, he paced about nervously wherever he could find the space, squeezing between groups and between individuals, and as he did so, he muttered to himself more than once, "What's he doing here? That one doesn't belong."

Many in the crowd were silent, though there were some who spoke aloud in languages only they could understand, and there were others who chanted either alone or in small groups. And as the energy level rose higher and higher, so too did the noise level of the crowd. And with time, the different chants coming from different groups, chants each with their own tune and chanted to their own rhythm, somehow all began to come together. They gradually began to move in unison, and they even came to harmonize with each other until finally it seemed that the entire crowd was engaged in one massive chant.

And as they chanted away more loudly and more cohesively all the time, still the only one who refused to go along with them was Jeband. Because he continued to mill about uneasily, looking at various members of the crowd and saying to himself, "There are some here who don't belong," and, "This can't be right, there are too many of the wrong ones," and, "How can this be the place of the few with that one here?"

But Jeband was clearly a voice in the wilderness, speaking doubts that no one shared. Because the whole time he was saying those things, the energy level of the crowd was rising steadily and the chant was growing ever more harmonious. The energy level was rising and rising, and the crowd itself seemed to rise along with it. They were floating in the air, or at least their collective mind was floating high above the scene, and they were constantly reaching greater heights and rising faster all the time. They were taking off toward heights that none of them could even have imagined before. They were rising so high and so fast that... Or wait a minute! Were they still rising faster all the time, or was their ascent beginning to slow down a bit? Were they starting to level off?

A sense of confusion began to grow within the crowd, growing slowly as at first a few of them and then more and more came to realize that there was something wrong, that while the energy level should have been continuing to rise to ever greater heights, instead it was beginning to plateau. And as the confusion became more pronounced and spread more rapidly among them, people looked about for an explanation. And at the same time, the chant steadily died down until there was nothing left but the stray noises of the last few stragglers who had yet to catch on. What was wrong? They didn't know, though by now it was becoming all too clear that the energy level was actually beginning to fall!

"This isn't the place!" Jeband yelled into G's ear as he grabbed him by the arm and dragged him in the direction of the car. "This isn't the place of the few. This is the place of those who can be deceived!" And with that, the two of them pushed their way through the disorganized and milling masses before breaking out into a sprint in the direction of G's car. Ramal saw what was happening and tried to join them, breaking his formerly long silence once again as he shouted for them to wait and running as fast as his fat legs could carry him. But just as G was about to say something about their friend, Jeband yelled at him once more, "Forget about him! He's too slow." And with a shove for emphasis, he quickly convinced G to continue their race for the car.

"Floor it!" Jeband hollered as soon as he got inside, and he nearly blew his top when he saw how G took the time to slide his window open before starting the car. G had to do it, though, because he couldn't stand being closed up inside that car with the residual stink of Ramal still filling the air.

"Get going! Get going!!" Jeband was on the verge of complete hysteria by this time, and as he saw that some of the fastest members of the crowd were charging toward them and clutching at the door-handles, he launched into a spirited defense of the car. He checked all the locks, and he banged on the inside of his window as though he were fighting them off, and he yelled and cursed and even howled at them in defiance. And the only time he let up in his struggle was when he turned to yell at G, "Close that window!! We can't let them in!"

Close the window?! Was he crazy? Because with the window open, G could just barely breathe given the awful stench that pervaded the car. And the thought of taking that stuff in at full strength? Forget about it! G would rather be dragged outside by the mob and have his car stolen. The stink was that bad.

"Go!! Go!!!" Jeband screamed himself hoarse as the car began to move. And when he saw that G was losing time in an effort to avoid running anyone over, he grabbed at the wheel and tried to steer right at the pedestrians, tried to make them jump out of their path. Or else. And with the two of them fighting for control of the wheel as the car began to gain speed, they veered wildly from side to side, striking glancing blows at several of the Chosen who couldn't get out of the way in time, and they even made one direct hit on a guy who flopped around on the hood for several seconds before falling off. And that's not to mention the other Chosen One who grabbed onto the back of the car and was dragged by them nearly all the way to the main road before he finally let go.

“Left! Turn left!” Jeband yelled when they reached the main road. And as they drove along that road, the range of his speech became reduced to an endlessly repeated, “Faster!! You’ve gotta go faster!” He said it over and over again while G pushed his cheap little car as hard as he dared, shooting past cars whether he was sure there was enough room to get by or not, and the only time Jeband interrupted his steady stream of imprecations for speed was when he suddenly shouted out, “Left here!” But he said it so late in the game that G nearly rolled the car when he tried to obey, slamming on the brakes and skidding through the turn so wildly that the car even rose briefly onto two wheels. And then once they were speeding along on the new road, Jeband went right back to his endless repetitions of, “Faster! Faster!!”

Jeband seemed to know exactly where he was leading them this time as there was no back-tracking and no loop-the-loops and no scenic detours. Because instead, he led them arrow-straight in a single direction. And as they came within sight of another of the island’s *taules*, a tall, slender one in this case, one that stood just alongside the small side-road they were driving upon, he suddenly cried out in triumph, “This is the True Place! We’ve made it!!”

But had they really made it? Because as they drew closer, G could feel nothing at all. There was no energy and no sense of levitation. There was nothing. Just the normal, everyday Menorcan summer sun beating down upon them and the wind pouring in through his open window. Nothing else. And Jeband, too, quickly sensed that there was something wrong. So wrong that his air of triumph seemed to evaporate in an instant, and his self-confidence just as rapidly began to wilt and fade away. Were they there? Were they in the right place? Yes, they had to be, he was sure of it. But were they on time? That was the question he was afraid to ask, afraid that he already knew the answer.

They were the first of the Chosen Ones to arrive at this True Place of the Great Event, but as the car pulled to a stop and G turned off the motor, the peace and serenity of the scene seemed to strike the two of them like a fist. And suffering the effects of that blow, all they could do was sit there in stunned silence for long moments. They sat where they were, and they said nothing, and they did nothing. They didn’t even open the car doors. Because neither of them could believe what their senses were telling them: that it was all over and they had missed it.

They sat like that for some time—hours, minutes, or was it only seconds? Who could tell? And who could even say what those words meant in that world of pain and loss they now inhabited? They sat and sat, and they did nothing but grieve, but then all at once, they saw something that snapped them out of their lethargy. They saw that they weren’t alone after all as two people suddenly appeared off in the distance. Two people walking toward a car they hadn’t noticed before, one parked over on the other side of the *taula*.

Jeband was out of the car in an instant, running over to speak with these highest of the high, these Chosen among the Chosen, these Great Masters who had been the only ones capable of finding the True Place in time to witness the Great Convergence. He ran over to talk with them and learn from them and perhaps even to absorb some small part of their great and wonderful Wisdom. But then as he called out to them, and as they turned to face him, the sight of them nearly knocked him to the ground. The sight of those two who were so clearly not among the Chosen. Those two who were not the highest of the high and who had not come to that place in answer to the Call. Those two who were so clearly nothing but ordinary, everyday tourists!

And not just any tourists, either, but two of the most stereotypical tourists he had ever seen. Tourists who had come there by sheer happenstance, it seemed. Tourists who, out of pure, dumb luck, had just been the only witnesses to the Great Event of the Millennium.

They wore the type of shorts and loud shirts that so many tourists wear in Menorca, and they also wore the standard-issue sunhats. And while the man added to his typical tourist-look with a prominent pot-belly and a pair of sandals worn over dark socks, the woman added to hers with a white cream that she had smeared all over her nose.

“Were you there?” Jeband shouted as soon as he got within range. “Did you see it?”

“Did we see what?” the man replied in an accent that was every bit as English as Jeband’s.

“The Great Convergence! Did you see it?”

“The Great Convergence...? Is that what you call those structures back there?”

“No, the Great Convergence!!” Jeband was already losing patience. “The Great Event that just... The event that took place here.”

“Oh, that,” the man said in a non-committal way. “Yes, I suppose we saw something...”

“What?! What did you see? And what did you hear? And what did you feel?”

“I don’t know...” The man hesitated and seemed to draw back, taking fright at the insistent and aggressive tone that came from Jeband. And as he asked himself what this weird, unkempt character could want from him, he also asked whether he would be able to defend himself and his wife should the man suddenly turn violent.

“Did anything happen? That’s all I want to know.” Jeband was starting to change his approach. He was starting to plead. “I have to know!”

“Well yes, I suppose it did...” the man conceded, but then he clammed up again as G came up and joined the scene, and also as a second carload of Chosen Ones pulled up in the distance where G’s car was parked.

“What? What was it?” Jeband insisted.

“It was, uh...” The man paused to exchange glances with his wife, and then he continued in an uncertain tone. “It was all rather strange.”

“Yes? Yes?” Jeband was practically dropping to his knees as he begged for details.

“It was like nothing I’ve ever seen before. It was all very...”

And as the man exchanged another glance with his wife, Jeband went on begging, “Yes...? Please tell me more. Please!”

“It was very strange... There were... There seemed to be lights coming from somewhere...”

“Yes! The Lights!! Exactly! And what colors were they?”

“Colors...?” The man was taken aback by the question.

But then rather than give him time to recover and come up with an answer, Jeband leaped right ahead. “And the wind. The Great Wind! Was there a wind that seemed to come out of nowhere?”

“Yes, there was. But how did you know...?”

“And the Great Thunder! Did you hear a great noise?” Jeband was moving faster all the time now. He was pushing right toward the heart of the matter.

“Yes, that’s right. There was a...”

“And what did it say? What did the thunder say to you? And what did it tell you?!”

“What did it say...?” The man was clearly confused by the question, and he finally answered in a half-joking tone, “What could it possibly say? It was nothing but noise.”

“Nothing but noise...?” and with that, Jeband seemed to collapse in upon himself. He seemed to fall apart almost physically as he found himself being forced to abandon all hope of learning anything about the Great Convergence from this dunce. And in complete surrender, he suddenly fell into a dark, heavy silence, a silence so deep that it seemed to suck in everyone and everything else.

“Well, there was one thing,” the man finally broke the silence as he began with some hesitation. And then after exchanging yet another glance with his wife, he continued. “It was something that, uh... You might think I’m crazy to tell you this.”

Here the man paused again, waiting for some response from Jeband. But when all he received was more brooding silence, he soon went on. “It sounds crazy, I know, but I’m sure I saw those things floating up into the air.”

“Floating? Those things...?” G was forced to step in for Jeband who by now was far past the point of resuscitation. And his own lack of enthusiasm over this bit of information showed clearly in his voice.

“Yes, those big stones. They actually floated up into the air. We saw them. Both of us did.”

“Those big stones floated...?”

“Yes, they did,” the man went on. “Right up into the air. All of them...”

“It was quite something,” the man’s wife cut in. “I just wish I’d have thought to take a picture of it, because I’m sure I could’ve sold that picture to a magazine or something.”

LIVING HISTORY

Let's see now, G says to himself as he walks along. It must have happened somewhere around here.

He's walking down a small street near the center of Barcelona, and he's searching for the location of a little-known incident from the civil war that he's recently read about. But as he moves along, what he's searching for are not visual clues or any other types of evidence gathered from the book. No, what he's searching for is the living history of the incident. He's searching for its psychic remains, if you can call them that, the memories that continue to dwell in the place where the event occurred. He's looking for the echoes of the event that still linger among these streets and these buildings. Because history isn't something that lives only in books or in archives. It's much more than that. It's something that lives forever in the places where people lived and loved and fought and died, and if you want to experience it for yourself, all you have to do is go out and look at it. Look at it across time in the places where it still lives.

G can feel the living history whenever he walks around the city, and he especially feels it when he's in the older parts of town. He feels the presence of the Romans who first built the city, and he senses the whole succession of invaders and conquerors and re-conquerors who came later. He almost sees the knights who once rode through the narrow streets, and he thinks he hears the cries of the *Segadors* during their great revolt, and he's even convinced that he can smell the stench of death that filled the city after the great siege of 1714. He sees it all, and he feels it all. He feels it deep inside himself. And it's that deep-in-the-gut feeling that he's using now to search out the location of that incident from 1936.

Yes, this is it, he says as he comes to a sudden halt—and as he forces the pedestrians behind him to swerve and go around. This is the spot right here, and that was the building over there. G is absolutely certain as he looks up at the windows and balconies of the building where the fascist snipers once holed-up. The building where they hid and fired, and where they peppered the street with bullets. And he thinks he's starting to hear the bullets zinging and pinging all around him now.

And the barricade was right over there, I'm sure of it, he goes on speaking to himself as he abruptly sets out walking in that direction—and as he crashes into an old lady without even noticing that she's there. Without the least awareness of what he's done.

G walks until he reaches the location where the barricade once stood. That barricade which the anarchists built and manned back on the day when—paradoxically—they came out to fight in defense of the government. When they came out to fight against the army and its fascist allies. And as he stops to absorb the remnants of the events that occurred there on that tragic yet triumphant day, he sees the whole thing very clearly. He sees the old cobblestones piled up in a line that ran across the street, and he sees the anarchists who fought behind that barricade. He sees the way they defended the city with nothing but their courage and a few antiquated rifles. The way they stopped the army from taking over the city and the way that, almost by accident, they ended up making their own revolution. He sees them crouched behind that barricade, and right there among them, he sees the man he's read about in the book.

Look out! he yells silently just as the man was hit by a sniper's bullet and fell to the ground. Get down! Get down! he continues in silence, and then without warning, he suddenly steps out into the street—he steps right into the path of an oncoming taxi that screeches to a halt as the driver lays on the horn for all he's worth.

The driver honks and honks, and he curses out the window and makes angry gestures, but G sees and hears none of it. Because all his thoughts are with that poor man who lay there dying in the street. And when he reaches the fatal spot behind the barricade, he stops to look down, so absorbed in the tragedy of the man's death that he hears nothing from the so-called present. He doesn't hear the continuous honking of the taxi's horn, and he doesn't hear the insults that are thrown his way, and he doesn't hear it when the driver, finding that he has enough room to get by, revs his engine and shoots past with one final obscene gesture.

It's too late, it's always been too late, G says to himself in mourning over the loss. And he smells the dust and gunpowder of that day as he stands in the street and gazes down. He hears the bullets that flew in every direction. Ping! One of them hit the barricade not far from where he now stands. And there were others flying... Swish!!

"Geez, that was close!" G yells out loud as he ducks behind the barricade, doing his best to get out of the line of fire. That one was way too close for comfort.

And crouching there, he begins to survey his situation. Because here he is, in the middle of a war with no weapon and not much courage, caught up in a fight that ended decades ago. Caught up in a fight that has long since been won—and long since lost. So what is there for him to do now but get the hell out of there? And it isn't long before he starts to move along, walking in a crouch to the sidewalk at the end of the barricade—and barging his way into the flow of pedestrian traffic—as he seeks out the wall that provides the most protection from the snipers. And from there, he rushes off down the street, hugging the wall as he goes and plowing into anyone who gets in his way as he hurries along. He glances off people, some of whom yell at him while others just stop and stare and shake their heads. They stop to watch this crazy foreigner until he disappears around the first corner.

But then no sooner has he ducked around the corner than, all at once, G's attention comes snapping back to the present as he suddenly finds himself standing face-to-face with a pair of policemen. Their suspicions are immediately aroused when they see the way he's acting, so they look him over as he does his best to avoid their eyes. And soon, he's feeling in his pockets to see if he has a map or something like that with him. Something he can pull out and look at as though he were the typical lost tourist. Some prop he can use while he responds to the policemen's questions by playing dumb, by "doing the Swede" as the expression goes in Catalan.

THE BOX!

I'm not crazy. I'm not! And you shouldn't believe it if anyone tells you I am. Because there's nothing wrong with me, nothing at all. My mind is in perfect condition. It's as clear and lucid as a mind can be. Maybe even more so. And if I happen to sound a little stressed-out to you, well that's just because I am. But who wouldn't be stressed-out with what that box has been doing to me? That goddamned box!! That's the only thing wrong around here is that box. And if I could just figure out some way to get rid of it...

But that's the problem, you see, cause it's impossible. You can't get rid of it once you've got it. And it's like... It's like there's nothing you can do. And believe me, I've tried. I've tried everything I could think of, but I just can't do it.

And I even asked for help from M, too. That's my wife, M. I asked her to help me a bunch of times, but it's like she just doesn't get it. Cause like I tell her, "*la caixa*," which is the Catalan word for the box, but trouble is it's also the name of our bank. So whenever I say it, she thinks I'm talking about the bank, and it's like she thinks I've got an obsession with that place or something. So what I do next is I make the shape of a box with my hands, and I tell her I mean that type of *caixa*, but then she acts like she doesn't know what I'm talking about. And she says she's never seen a box like that.

Never seen it?! How can she say something like that when I showed it to her? I know I did! I remember it like it was yesterday. I showed it to her right after I brought it home. But now she says I never showed her anything. So who's the crazy one around here, huh? It's not me. I saw that box, and I still see it. I see it a lot. I see it all over the place. Like it follows me around or something and, uh... It, uh...

You know, I just wish there was some way for me to go back and unbuy that thing. Some way I could go back to that store and back to that day, and I could say no, I don't want to buy it after all. Some way I could just... Though of course, I know I can't do that, cause I'm not crazy. I'm really not.

But it all started that day when I went to that numismatic shop down by Maria Cristina. That little basement shop where I've been going for years to buy civil war "*vales*," the old emergency money that was issued by anybody and everybody in the Republican zone during the war. Because the guy who runs that shop, this nice old man by the name of Foix, he's one of the biggest dealers in *vales* in the whole city. And you can see right away, as soon as you walk in, what a selection he's got by the way the walls of his shop are lined with boxes and albums full of the stuff. And that's not to mention the "special" stuff he sometimes goes and pulls out of his back room. Special stuff like that box. That... That...

I mean, who ever heard of a box like that where you can't get rid of, huh? And a box that when you open it up, you... you... I don't know what you do exactly. But it's like you break all the laws of the universe or something. It's like you... You open it, and you...

Well, whatever it is that you do, I'd better get back to my story, okay? Cause like I was saying, I was in the shop that day, and I was speaking Spanish with Senyor Foix the way I

always do. Cause even though he's Catalan, he's one of that older generation where they think it's impossible for foreigners to speak Catalan. Where all they ever speak with them is Spanish. And even though I tried a few times to get him to switch to Catalan, he'd just give me a little kinda smile each time, a smile like thanks for trying, and then he'd keep right on speaking Spanish. Or at least he would until some local came in, cause with them, he'd speak Catalan. He'd blab away and then after awhile, he'd turn to me and translate some of the stuff they were saying into Spanish. And that's even though my Catalan is a hell of a lot better than my Spanish.

So I was in there that day, and I was looking over his stuff and picking out a few pieces I wanted for my collection, the same way I always do, and I asked him if he might have anything new or unusual. And he says to me wait a minute, and he goes into the back room, and then he comes out a little while later with this box. That box! That goddamned box!! That...

No, hold on there. I've gotta calm down. I've gotta stick with my story. I've gotta... So let's see now... Well, Senyor Foix knows that I buy all sorts of stuff from the war, but that I'm especially interested in anything that has to do with the anarchists. Any types of *vales* or documents or other stuff from their rural collectives or their collectivized industries, or from the different revolutionary committees or other anarchist-dominated groups like that. So he brings out this box, and he shows me where it's got some paper stuck to it like it was a seal or something, and on the paper, there's this rubber stamp from the Scientific Section of the Anti-Fascist Militias Committee of Barcelona. Now, as much as I'd read and studied about the war, I'd never heard that there was a scientific section of that committee before, but when I looked at the stamp, I thought what the hell. It looks like the real thing to me. And you know, a new discovery like that can do a whole lot more for your collection than just buying a bunch of well-known pieces, right?

So I asked him how much he wants for it, and he gives me this price. And it's a low one, too, cause he really doesn't deal in boxes and stuff like that. It's just something that someone brought in a while back, and all he's doing is passing it on. He's an honest dealer, so he's not trying to make some big profit from it. He's just passing it along to me.

And me? I'm this sucker who thinks he's getting a great deal on some rare, one-of-a-kind artifact. And I've got no idea what I'm actually getting myself into. Cause all I'm doing is buying a box, right? And you know, one of the weird things about it is that when I looked it over, I didn't even see a way to open it, cause the outside of the box looked solid. And when I asked him about it, Senyor Foix says that he doesn't know if it opens or not. He says he never even tried...

Open it?! Not open? Hell, that's not the problem! The problem is closing it again, cause once it's open, you can't do it. You can't close it ever again. You can't put things back and make them the way they used to be. You can't... Or wait, did I just say put things back? Cause that's not what you do at all, since there's nothing in the box. And I mean absolutely nothing, like a complete void where there's... Where it's like... Cause tell me, how can you ever put nothing back into a box once you've let it out, huh? How can you do that? How can anybody put nothing into a box? How can they...?

Oh, it looks like I'm getting away from my story again, aren't I? Cause every time I think about that box, I get so... so... So let's see now, where was I? Oh yeah, I was leaving the store with that evil, damned box in a plastic bag, and I was heading toward the subway to take it home. And I was... You know, it really didn't hit me at the time, but now that I think about it, I remember how I heard something when I was leaving the shop. Cause like just as I was opening the door, I heard Senyor Foix's daughter or someone in the backroom say something about shouldn't he tell me about what the woman who brought the box in said. What she told them about what happened to her father. But then I couldn't hear what he said back to her, so I really didn't think much about it at the time.

No, I just walked out of that place fat, dumb and happy. I walked out of that shop, and I walked into a nightmare. A real, true, living nightmare. A real... Oh, I don't know what to call it because nightmare is such a weak word for describing what I've been through. I mean, nightmares? Those are nothing. I have them every night, all night, and I have them every day. I have nothing but nightmares. Cause my whole life is one big nightmare! That's what it is. Ever since I bought that box, and ever since I opened it up.

But you know, I couldn't open it when I first got it home. I took it out, and I looked it over, and I played around with it, but I couldn't see any way to make it open. Cause it was pretty solid-looking. It was just this simple little box with nothing fancy about it and nothing interesting in its design, either. Nothing but that seal and the stamp from the militias committee. And I couldn't for the life of me figure out why they would have been so interested in a box like that. Why would they have given it over to their scientific section for study or whatever? Because it was nothing but a solid, sealed box. Though not a solid one on the inside, cause I could tell by the weight that it was hollow. But it sure as hell seemed solid on the outside.

Well, I messed around with it for a little while, and then finally I set it down on a shelf and left it sitting there. And when M got home from work, I took it down and showed it to her.

I did! I really did!! I showed it to her! I showed her that box no matter what she says about it now. I showed it to her, and she says to me, That's nice, and then she asks me if I've wasted all my money on it like she always does. But whatever comments she made about it at the time, she definitely saw the box that day. I know she did! And if she doesn't remember it now, it's only because she's got a bad memory. It's not because I'm crazy, and it's not because I'm making this stuff up. Cause I'm not! I'm not crazy, I tell you! It all happened exactly the way I'm describing it to you now.

So what I did was I left the box sitting on the shelf, and I didn't hardly think about it again after that. Except that every once in awhile, I'd take it down and look it over and stuff like that, but that was about all. Or at least that was all until this one day when I noticed something strange about the box. It was this day when M was at work and I was in the apartment alone. And like no sooner had I walked into the living-room than I felt something like... Like I could hear the box calling to me or something. Like it was... not calling me exactly, since it didn't have a voice and it didn't make any noise, but it was like... Well, it was like it was calling me in a different way, okay?

And me, I went over to the box, and I picked it up, and it was like there was something weird about it. I noticed it right away, cause for one thing, it didn't even look like the same box anymore. It looked like a completely different one. Cause like instead of being plain and simple, it had these designs all over it. And right in the middle of the designs there was this one that looked like it had to be a fancy catch for a latch. It looked like a place where I could open the box.

But I didn't hit that latch right away, cause I was trying to figure out what the hell had happened. I was trying to see where the plain, old solid shell that used to cover the box had gone. Had it fallen off, and was it laying there on the shelf? No, that wasn't it, cause when I looked at the shelf, there was nothing left behind. The old cover had vanished without a trace. And as I looked the box over, I could see that it still had the seal of the committee on it, too, though now that seal was attached to the design-covered skin of the box.

Anyway, it wasn't long before I decided to see what there was inside. If anything. I decided to open it up and take a look. And so with the box sitting on the table, I pushed in on that wooden latch, and I...

No! Stop!! Don't open it!! Don't! Don't make the same mistake twice, even if it's only in your memory. Don't do it!

Wait a minute, what was that? Who just said that? Was it me? Was I talking to myself? Or was I...? No, it couldn't have been me, cause then I really would be crazy, wouldn't I? If I talked to myself like that... So just forget about it, okay? Forget that it ever happened.

What I was saying was that I pushed in on the latch, and I opened the lid, and then I looked inside. But what I saw in there was nothing. And when I say nothing, I mean absolutely nothing, because not only was there nothing inside the box, but there wasn't even an inside! There were no sides, and there was no bottom. There was just this strange kind of darkness and nothing else. Because as weird as it sounds, the inside of the box had no shape, and it had no borders. It was like the mouth of the thing was some sort of window into a whole different world, a dark and mysterious and seemingly limitless world.

Now, I didn't know what to do as I looked into that strange new world inside the box. And while I was tempted to reach in there and see what the place was like, I knew that would be a very bad idea. Cause talk about sticking your hand into a place where you've got no idea what's there. That's not my idea of common sense. So what I did instead was I took a pencil, and I stuck it inside. And I mean I stuck it all the way inside, but as far as it went, the pencil never hit bottom. And it seemed like it must have gone right through the table that box was sitting on, too. Cause it went in that far.

After that, I started to look around for something longer I could stick into the box, and I came up with this ruler. But when I stuck it in, it didn't hit bottom either. And when I bent down to see what was happening underneath the table, I couldn't see where it came out anywhere. It just went in and that's all. So I picked up the box and looked at the bottom, but it looked solid and normal to me, just like it had before. And when I stuck the ruler back in, I didn't see anything happen on the bottom, no ruler come sticking out and no changes in the designs on the

box. Nothing. Well, the next thing I did was I looked around for something even longer I could use, and after a minute or two, I thought about the broom. That's a lot longer than the ruler, right? So I went and got the broom, and I started to lower the handle down inside the box. But when I did, it just kept right on going. It went all the way to the bristles without touching a thing, and when I looked under the table again, I saw that it still didn't come out anywhere down there. And that when I knew it was sticking far enough into that box to where it should have gone all the way through the floor, not to mention the table. But it didn't. It just went in and in. It went down into I-don't-know-where.

By this time, I was feeling a little braver about sticking my hand inside. Cause nothing had happened to any of the stuff I'd put in there so far. So why not give the hand a try, huh? Or at least a finger, which is what I eventually did. I stuck my finger in a little ways and then a little ways further and then further still, but it was like nothing. It was like I was poking it into any old empty space. And of course that's exactly what it was. It was nothing but a whole bunch of emptiness. Nothing but a boxful of nothingness.

Well, I played around with it for a little while longer, and I tried sticking a few more things inside, including finally my whole arm. And then after awhile, when I started to get bored with it, I closed the box up and put it back on the shelf. And I left it there till M got home, which is when I took it down to show her what it was like on the inside.

And I did! Just like before. I took it down, and I showed it to her. Or at least I showed her the outside of it again. And I'm not making this up, either. I'm not hallucinating. I'm not! I showed it to her for a second time. I showed it to her even though now she says that I didn't.

But I did show it to her that day. That evil thing, that... I showed it to her, but you know what? As soon as I went to pick it up, I saw that it was playing some type of trick on me. Because by then, it had gone back to being the plain old box it had been before. It had lost its designs, and it had lost its latch, too. And with the latch gone, of course there was no way for me to open it up and show her the inside. There was no way for me to show her the strange world I'd found within that box.

Cause the box is like that. It really is. It plays tricks on you all the time, and it changes whenever it feels like it. Whenever it wants to mess with your mind and try to make you crazy. And it sure as hell knows how to make you, uh... To, uh... Well, let's just say that it's been messing with my mind for a long time now, okay?

The next day when M was at work and I was in the apartment alone, I began to feel like the box was calling me again, just like it had the day before. I felt it starting in on another one of its mind-games. And sure as hell, when I went over and took a look at it, I saw that the thing had gone and changed on me once again. I saw that the designs had reappeared—the same designs or new ones, I wasn't quite sure. But I could see designs all over it, and I could see that the latch had reappeared, too. So after I took the box down and set it on the table, I went ahead and pushed in on that latch...

No! Don't do it!! Not a second time! Not after you got away with it the first time. Don't open it again!

Hey, there it goes again. There's that voice. That voice from somewhere, that... But it can't be from me, can it? No, that's impossible. It can't be.

So anyway, as I was saying, I opened the box again, and I played around with it a little bit more just like I did the day before. But then what I decided to do next was I decided to outsmart the thing, so instead of closing it, I left the box sitting open on the table. I left it that way, and I waited for M to get home. Cause by doing that, I'd be able to show her what there was on the inside, right? Or maybe I should say that I'd show her what wasn't there inside that box. Because how was it gonna change on me now if I left it sitting wide open, huh? How was it gonna turn back into that solid box again?

Well, it was a bad idea, as it turns out. A real bad idea. Cause I don't know if I need to tell you this or if you've already got it figured out by now, but there's no way you can ever outsmart that box. There's just no way. And if you try, the only thing you're gonna do is you're gonna make it mad. And you're gonna... You're gonna make it turn mean and spiteful and... You're gonna make things even worse than they already are, is what you're gonna do.

And that's exactly what I did that day when I left the box open. I turned the damned thing against me, and I... Or you know what? I think that box was always against me. Right from the start. I think it was always out to get me. And all I did that day was I made it come out and show its true colors. I made it take the gloves off. I made it quit playing around with the petty little mind-games and start in on the big ones. And I mean big. Cause from that point on, it's been nothing but... It's been... I think I already called it a nightmare, didn't I? Cause it's been... It's like I've never been able to close that box back up ever since.

Didn't I tell you?! Didn't I say not to open it?!!

Oh, shut up you! Whoever you are. I don't have time to listen to your bullshit. So just stay out of this, okay?

Geez, I don't know who the hell that guy thinks he is... So anyway, as I was saying, it's ever since that moment that things really started to go wrong. And even though I'm sure it was all inevitable ever since I first brought the box home, still I can't help but wish that I hadn't done what I did that day. Wish that I hadn't been so stupid as to try to outsmart the box. Because what happened after that was so... It was so subtle at first but so insidious. It was... It was like it all came out of nowhere, like everything came sneaking up on me when I wasn't paying attention. Like it crept up behind me or something. And I had no idea that there was anything wrong till after it was way too late. After it had all come completely out of the box and filled the apartment. All that strange emptiness, that nothingness, that... that... That total breakdown of the basic laws of nature.

And as I sat around with the box open, I didn't even notice that there was anything happening. I mean, I sat there and read a book while I waited for M to get home, and I watched a little TV. And it wasn't till I got up to go to the bathroom that all of a sudden, I realized there was something wrong. Something terribly wrong. Because it was the strangest thing I've ever been through. It was like I was in some weird dream that had come to life. Cause when I got up and tried to walk over there, I couldn't do it. I couldn't find the place! And it wasn't like the

bathroom had moved or anything like that. No, it was still right where it had always been, and the living-room was right where it had always been, too. Or at least as far as I could tell they were still in the same places. But it was just that... It was like there was no way to get from here to there. No way to walk there. No way to... I mean, it was completely impossible!

Cause when I got up, things looked a little out-of-whack to me, but I didn't worry too much about it, and I started to walk toward the bathroom anyway. Next thing I knew, though, I was in the spare room all the way down at the far end of the apartment. And I said, What the hell? How did I get here? But then when I turned and looked around and started to walk back in what I thought was the direction toward where I wanted to go, it was only to find myself in the bedroom without knowing how I got there. And when I started to walk out of there, I ended up... I, uh... Well, I ended up somewhere else, though I can't remember exactly where. Cause some of the details of that day are awful hazy to me right now. It's like they're all part of this bad dream, this dream that started that day but now keeps going on and on. And if I can't remember every detail, well that's just the way dreams are, right?

And it's not like there's anything wrong with my mind, you understand. And my memory? It's as good as it's ever been. It's just that I'm a little bit hazy about some of it, that's all. And anyway, so what if I can't remember everything! So what! Cause having a bad memory doesn't mean you're crazy, does it? No, a bad memory just means a bad memory. That's all it means. And if a lot of things are all kinda jumbled up and mixed together in my head, and if my memories keep jumping around on me, and they keep... They keep playing these mind-games on me is what they do. Like with the way they keep making me remember one thing when I'm trying to remember something else, and the way they... Because they're in on it with that box! I know they are!! They keep helping it try to drive me crazy. But they won't succeed! They can't succeed! They'll never make me crazy! Never!! They...

Hey, wait a minute. I'm getting carried away again, aren't I? So maybe I should get back to my story, okay? Maybe I should get back to that day when I, uh... That day when everything went wrong. That first day of the living hell that my life has been ever since.

Because what had happened was that the box had done something to the space inside the apartment. It had done something to its dimensions. It had made it to where I couldn't just walk from here to there anymore, cause whenever I started out to go somewhere, there was no telling where I was gonna end up. It was like there were all these extra dimension all over the place, everywhere I looked and everywhere I went. And when I tried to move around the apartment, I could never tell which dimension was which. I could never tell where the one I was going down would take me. Cause like I'd start off in what looked like one direction only to have it curve so quickly and so radically that I'd come out in a whole different part of the apartment that had nothing to do with where I thought I was going. Or I'd take some other dimension that curled up on itself and left me stuck where I was. Right in the same spot. Or I'd take these other ones that seemed to stretch off into infinity. These dimensions where things kept getting farther away as I went along rather than getting closer. And that's not to mention the even weirder dimensions, like the ones that split off in more than one direction at the same time, or the ones that led into what seemed like parallel worlds. Places that were... Well, they were parallel, that's all I can tell you about them. And the thing is that, when I walked around, I never knew where I was heading until after I got there. And in fact most of the time, I couldn't even tell what I was looking at

when I looked around me, because everything was so distorted. There were things I'd see that shouldn't have been there, at least not together, and things that should have been next to each other but weren't. And there were other things I'd see in more than one place, and things that... Well, it was strange. It was very strange. Very, uh...

So anyway, it took me quite awhile, but finally after a long and frustrating search, I managed to find my way back to the living-room again that day. And then once I was there, I was so afraid of moving around anymore that all I did was stay right where I was. I didn't want to get lost again, so I forgot all about going to the bathroom. I told myself it was better to hold it than to start wandering around through all those weird dimensions again. And while I was seriously tempted to go over to the table and close the box and try to get everything back to normal, I knew there was no way I'd ever be able to walk all the way over to where it was without getting lost again. I knew I'd never make it. So in the end, I didn't even try. And instead, I just sat down where I was, and I waited for help. I sat and waited for M to come home.

She got there at the usual time, and it was like the moment she entered the room, everything suddenly went back to normal. All those extra dimensions disappeared just like that, and the space inside the room snapped back to its normal three dimensions. And I was so relieved when I saw her—and when I saw what her presence had done—that I rushed over and gave her a big hug and a kiss and another kiss. And she says like, Hey, what's got into you tonight? And like, Later, and stuff like that.

So then the next thing I thought about was the box, of course. I thought this would be the chance for me to go over and close it now that M was here and I could make it all the way to the table without getting lost. So I went over there but—surprise!—the box wasn't there anymore. It wasn't on the table, either open or closed, the fancy box or the plain one. It just wasn't there! And I even felt around for it to make sure it hadn't gone and turned invisible on me or something like that. But no, there was nothing on that table. And when I looked over at the shelf, it wasn't there either. It was gone without a trace. It was gone without giving me a last chance to close it. Without giving me one last chance at redemption.

I was about to say something to M when she says to me that she's gonna go into the kitchen, and like as soon as I heard it, the alarm bells went off in my head. Because I knew that her presence had straightened everything out in that room where we were, but had she fixed up things in the whole apartment or was it just one room at a time? I didn't know, and I didn't want to find out the hard way, so I dashed over and told her I'd go with her. And friends, that's exactly what I did. I went to the kitchen with her, and after that, I followed her everywhere she went. I followed her when she left the kitchen, and I followed her down the hall back to the living-room. I followed her when she went into the bedroom, and I even followed her into the bathroom. I squeezed my way into that tiny room beside her, and the moment she got ready to leave, I got ready, too. Cause while I knew I was safe as long as I was with her, I was afraid of what would happen if we ever separated. If I let so much as a single wall come between us. Because she was my salvation. She was my lifeline. She was the only thing I had left to keep me connected with the three-dimensional world, and I didn't want to lose contact with her ever. So I followed her everywhere she went that evening, as weird as she may have found my behavior. Because she...

But you know what? Now that I think about it, I wonder if she might have been in on it all along. If she might have been working with the box and this was just a mind-game she was playing on me. The way she'd make everything clear-up whenever she was around. I wonder if she wasn't doing it on purpose. She and that damned box. Cause she was... I mean, she always denied seeing the box, didn't she? She denied it right to my face even though I showed it to her twice. But she lied about seeing it, right? She out-and-out lied. And what do you call that if it's not a mind-game, huh? So she must have been in on it with the box all along, she and all the rest of them. She must have been...

But no, it's just too hard to believe that she'd do something like that to me. I can't believe it. I won't believe it! Because she couldn't. Not her. Not M. She just... No!

So let's see now, it's time to get back to the story, isn't it? Back to, uh... Now where was I? Was I at the part about trying to find the box? Or was I... Was it something about M? I'm not sure. I can't quite... Oh, this damned memory of mine! I can't seem to make the thing work right anymore. I can't make it remember the things I want to remember. It's like it refuses to do what I tell it to do. And like it's losing track of what I said and what... Like everything is getting so jumbled up in there. So mixed and stirred and blended that it's hard to...

Well, I tell you what I'll do. I'll just talk about the things I can remember, okay? And while I don't know if they'll be in any type of order, I'll tell you whatever I can.

Like there was this one day when M was going to work and I didn't want to spend another day in the apartment alone. Cause I'd had enough of that, and I didn't want to sit in one place all afternoon without moving the way I did other days, since that was the only way I knew how to keep from getting lost while she was away. So I went out with her that day, and I waited with her till her bus came, and then I started to go for a walk. And I didn't care where I went, either, as long as I stayed away from the apartment. Cause with all those other people out there on the streets, there was no way that box would dare to play its games on me, was there? It wouldn't. It couldn't, not with so many people around. But you know what? It did. It played its games anyway. It played them right out there in public. Cause there I was one minute, walking along a street full of people, and next thing I knew, I was walking down the hall of the apartment. I was right back in the trap! And to make things even worse, I couldn't find any way to get back out of the hall that day. I couldn't find the living-room, and I couldn't find anyplace else. All I could find was hall and more hall and still more hall. So after I'd walked and run up and down that endless tube for I don't know how long, I finally had to give up. I had to sit down right where I was and wait till M got home. Till she came back and saved me from that...

And there was this other time when I actually found the box again. I found it sitting on the table right in front of my chair in the living-room. And it was back to its plain, old unopenable self, too, as it sat there within my very grasp. Well, I reached over and picked it up, of course. And as I turned it over in my hands and looked at it, I said, Aha! I've got you now! And next thing I, uh... I didn't want to lose that opportunity, you see, so I had to get up and take a chance. I had to take the thing with me and try to find the door going out, since it was my chance to get rid of the box once and for all. I had to give it a try. I had to look for the door where I'd be able to take it outside and throw it away or leave it somewhere, where I'd be able to get it out of the apartment and make it stay out.

But as I walked along with the box in my hands, the dimensions of the place started acting up on me right away. They acted up the way they always did, or maybe even worse than always. Cause they had me going around and around and in-and-out of I-don't-know-where. They had me wandering in circles and jumping around and going everywhere but the place I wanted to go. And I... Well, I have to admit that I never found the door to the apartment that day. But you know what? I found something else that was almost as good, cause all at once, there came a moment when I realized that I was standing right in front of an open window. And when I saw that, I didn't think twice about giving the box the old heave-ho. I didn't think twice about tossing it out and then closing the window behind it. And no sooner was it gone than I felt like this huge weight came lifting off my shoulders. Off my very being.

I was free! I was rid of the box at last. And as I looked around, I could see that the apartment had returned to its normal three dimensions. Thank God! I said to myself. Or thank Buddha or whoever it is that a non-believer like me is supposed to thank. Because I was finally free of that thing and its curse. Its... whatever it was. I was free, and I was safe as I walked back to the chair in the living-room. It was finally over, and I was rid of...

The box!! It was back!!! Because as I approached the chair, I could see that ugly thing sitting there on the table again, right back where it had been before. Just like I hadn't done a thing with it. And at the same instant I spotted it, the space inside the apartment suddenly went haywire on me again. It jumped right back into that weird, multi-dimensional...

But tell me, is it fair for that box to play those games with my head? To make me think everything is okay and then, wham! I'm right back in that living hell. I mean, it's not fair! It's... It's cheating, I tell you. But that box is so evil, and it's so vindictive. It's so spiteful. So... It's a menace to humanity!! That's what it is! And you know, with anybody else, it probably would have driven them crazy long before this with all the games it's been playing. It would have driven them right out of their minds. But not me!! It can't do it with me! It can't make me crazy no matter how hard it tries. It can't! Not now, and not ever!!

And you know, it plays a hell of a lot of mind-games. Cause like there was this one time when I was sitting in the chair and all of a sudden, the box just like appeared on the table right in front of me. And it...

Oh, wait a minute. I already told you about that one, didn't I? I remember it now. I sure do. Cause no matter how mixed-up my memory is getting to be, I can at least remember that much. I'm not stupid. And I'm not crazy! Not me!! Not by a long-shot.

So let's see, if I already told you about that, what's something I haven't told you about? Something like... Like for instance, I haven't told you about the parallel worlds, have I? The parallel spaces or whatever you call them. Those places I sometimes slip into without even knowing how I got there. Those worlds that are... They're exactly like this one but they're not it, and they, uh... They run parallel to it, and they're separated from this world by a... by some sort of a... Like you can't call it space cause it's not space, but it's like this weird dimension or something like that, and it's, uh... It's like you're here but you're not here, if you know what I mean. Cause you're in this world, but it's not this world anymore. You're in a parallel world and

it, uh... Well, it runs parallel. So you're here, but it's not actually here. You're, uh... You're somewhere else cause you, uh... Cause you're...

And you know, it isn't easy to get back from one of those worlds when you find yourself there, back into this one that we call reality. It's... Hey, wait a minute, did I just call this world of ours reality? Man, I've gotta be kidding, cause what's real about this stuff that's been happening to me, huh? What's real about the crazy world that box has opened up on me? Cause it's... Opened up? I just said the box opened it up, didn't I? Now that's gotta be a joke, isn't it? Cause the box didn't open up anything, if you remember. It was me opened up the box. So when I say it opened something up, it's like... What do you call it? Is it like irony or something? I don't know...

But like I was just saying about the parallel worlds—that is what I was talking about, isn't it? Cause at least I can remember that far back. I can remember what I was talking about thirty seconds ago. So even if I can't remember what I was saying five minutes ago, I at least have a little bit of memory left. And I can... Oh wait, what was I talking about? Something about, uh... About parallel worlds, wasn't it? Yeah, that's it.

Well, what I didn't know about those worlds at first was I didn't know I could get lost in them without even leaving my chair. Cause I thought the only way to pass through dimensions and slip into weird places was by getting up and walking around and stuff like that. But then there came this day when I never left the chair. Never! I swear I didn't. I sat there all day, and I didn't move. But when M got home, it was like... Like I could hear her calling me and asking where I was, but that was all. I couldn't see her, cause I was stuck in this parallel world without even knowing I was in it till that moment. And I had no idea how I got there.

The one thing I knew, though, was that her voice was my connection with the world of "reality." It was the thing I could follow as I tried to find my way back. So I got up and started to walk in the direction of the voice, but then all at once, I asked myself, What if I couldn't make it back when she was there? Cause she was in the normal world with its three solid dimensions, right? So how was I gonna break through into that world from this one while she was still around? While she was there blocking out all the other worlds like this one I was in?

I didn't know. I couldn't say. So what I finally decided to do was to wait till I heard her leave the room, and then once she was gone, what I'd do was I'd go charging off in the direction I'd heard her voice coming from. I'd charge off like gangbusters and try to find my way back to the real world before she returned. And you know, that's exactly what I ended up doing. I started to run the second I heard her walk out of the room, and I didn't care where I went or what I ran into as long as I kept going. Because I had to get back to that world. I just had to. So I ran and ran, and I bounced off stuff that suddenly showed up in my path. And I tripped over stuff, and I fell down, and I got back up and ran some more. I ran through world after world, and I didn't stop running for anything. I ran and ran, and then all at once, I ran headlong into M as she came walking back into the room. I ran into her damn near full-speed, and I knocked her flat on the ground.

I couldn't apologize to her enough as I helped her back to her feet. I told her how sorry I was, how dreadfully sorry. I told her over and over again, and I... But I was so wound up and so

excited about having finally made it back to the real world, and at the same time, I was so out of breath and so disheveled from all the running I'd been doing that I'm afraid I must have... I'm afraid I put a real scare into her that day is what I did. Cause when I looked into her eyes, they had this look of fear in them like I'd never seen before, this look of fear that was so clear and so palpable and so...

But there was nothing for her to be afraid of. There was nothing wrong with me that day, and there still isn't. There really isn't. And I wanted to reassure her and calm her down. So I decided to come out and tell her everything right then and there. To tell her about the box and the weird dimensions and the parallel worlds and all the rest. To tell her everything I knew about what was happening to me. To tell her everything I could think of. But you know what? It didn't do a bit of good, and it didn't wipe that look of fear off her face, either. Cause if anything, it seemed like the more I told her, the more afraid she became. And afraid of me, too. I could see it in her eyes. I could see that she was afraid of me when she should have been afraid of that mind-killing box that was behind all this. But no. Not it. She wasn't afraid of the box. She was afraid of me! Me!!

What else could I have done, though? What other weapon did I have at my disposal right then besides the truth? And if the truth hadn't worked, if it hadn't calmed her down and brought her over to my side, then what alternative did I have left? Because the truth was the only thing I had on my side. It was the only thing I could use to counter the evil schemes of that box and the... The whatever it was that was behind it. The evil people and evil powers that were working and plotting against me and trying to drive me insane. Because there's no way that box could have done all those things on its own, is there? No way! It had to have help. It had to be working with something bigger, with... with... I don't know who or what. But there's no way a little box like that could have done so much all by itself. It's impossible!

And me? I was... Wait, where was I now? What was I talking about? Was it, uh...? Just a minute, I'll think of it. I'll, uh...

Hey, did I tell you about this time when the box suddenly appeared on the table in front of me? Did I tell you that one? That day when I picked it up and tried to... That day back when I still believed I could get rid of it by just throwing it away. Because I know now that I can't. So these days when it appears in front of me, I don't even pay attention to it. I ignore it. Cause I know that all it's doing is playing mind-games on me. The way it keeps showing up and trying to tempt me. Trying to build up my hopes that I can do something about it, build them up so it can burst them and make me...

Like there it is right now! Do you see it? And do you hear the way it's laughing at me and taunting me and making fun of me? Do you hear it? Do you?!

No, of course you don't. What am I thinking about? Because you're not even here with me, so how could you see it, huh? You're somewhere else and all you're doing is reading this stuff I'm writing. And you're... You're...

You know what you are? And I mean really. What you really are. Really and truly. You're my lifeline, that's what you are! You're my last hope! You're my... Because M is in on

it with all the rest of them. I know that now. I'm sure of it. She's in on it with the box and the evil powers and evil schemes behind it. She's helping that damned thing, she and everyone else around here. She and... Like that Pere. Cause wasn't she the one who brought him into this? Pere, our brother-in-law the doctor. Wasn't she the one who asked him to come over and check me out, him and her sister? Wasn't it her? Cause it sure as hell wasn't me! I never asked him to come and look me over and ask me a bunch of questions. And to shake his head slightly and then go off and whisper stuff to M. And I never asked him for those pills, either, those pills she's been trying to feed me ever since. Those pills she says are supposed to calm me down. As though there was anything wrong with me! As though everything that's happened wasn't the fault of that box and the people who are working with it and conspiring with it. The people who are doing everything they can to drive me insane. But they won't succeed! Not with all of them working together. They'll never make me crazy! Never!!

And I refuse to take those pills. I won't let them poison me on top of everything else they've been doing to me. So what I do is I pretend to swallow them, but I really throw them away. And I never believe a word that any of them tell me. Not a single word! Cause it's all lies, nothing but lies. And I know that now. I know it's all part of the evil plan. Part of the conspiracy! Like remember that time when M told me how she went and talked to Senyor Foix, and how he told her... Well, he lied to her is what he did. Cause wasn't he the first one in on it? Wasn't he the first one to help the box back when he gave the thing to me? You remember that, don't you? He was the one who started it all off. So how can you believe anything he says? You can't! And how can you believe what M says, either, since she's part of it, too? Like with the way she always lies about seeing the box, the way she says she never saw it. Well bullshit! I showed it to her. I did! I showed it...

Because you remember that, don't you? You remember how I showed her the box. And you saw it yourself, too, didn't you? I know you did. So please don't lie to me about it. Not you! Don't deny that I showed it to you, and don't act like all the others. Don't join them. Please! Because you're the only hope I have left. You're the only person who can stop them before it's too late. Only you...

And you know what they're trying to do now? They're trying to separate us is what. They're trying to take this paper away from me! They're trying to stop me from writing to you. Cause they say the writing is only making me worse. They say it's contributing to my condition. Whatever that means. But I won't let them, I tell you! I won't let them stop me, because if I lose my connection with you, then I'll be completely lost. I'll be caught in their evil hands and their evil schemes with no way out. I'll be completely alone. Without help! Without my last hope! Without you!!

So whenever they come around and try to take it away, what I do is I hide the paper as soon as I hear them coming. I hide it in places where they can't find it, like in those weird dimensions and places like that. Cause they can't get into the places where I go. And they can't find the paper when I put it there. They can't find it, and they can't find me, either. Not unless I want them to. But they're always trying to sneak up on me. All the time. They're always trying to catch me with the paper in my hands so they can take it away. But I won't let them!! I won't let them cut me off! Not from you. Not from the one person who can still save me. The one

person who's not in on the conspiracy. Cause I'll beat them! I swear I will!!! I'll keep writing, and I'll never give in! I'll never let them drive me crazy! Never!!

But they're sneaky, I tell you, and they're persistent. They're always trying to catch me. They're always sneaking around this place. Like they're probably doing it right now. They usually are. They're probably looking for a chance to take th

FURNITURE LIB

The events I am about to relate took place a few months after my wife and I bought our first home in the United States, while we were in the process of furnishing it. It was a modest house by American standards, something that would probably be called a starter-home in that nation of bigger-is-better ostentation. But for us, it was more than big enough to fill our needs along with those of our two-year-old daughter, being a solid and well-preserved old two-story structure built long before house-sizes had become as inflated as they presently are.

Upon moving in, our first project became that of furnishing our new home, a project which turned out to be far more difficult than either of us had anticipated. And the main reason for that difficulty had to do with the fact that affordable furniture in the United States tends to be so cheap-looking and so poorly-designed, while attractive and well-built pieces are generally priced well beyond the level that the two of us were prepared to pay. So it took a great deal of time and effort to find the furniture we wanted, and the process dragged on for month after month.

But there was also a second major factor behind our slow progress, that being the fact that my wife M and I so seldom agreed upon which pieces would fit best into our new home. Now M is European by birth and by rearing, but in spite of that fact, she has an almost American level of innocence when it comes to the concept of interior design. She wants to buy any piece of furniture that catches her eye, with no regard for how it will fit in with the rest of the furnishings, while I tend to keep my attention focused upon the big picture. I look at how well a potential piece will fit into the general scheme of things rather than how it looks on its own, and I tell her when I think it will clash with the things we already have. And while in most cases I was able to dissuade her from making what I thought to be unwise purchases, there was at least one occasion upon which she over-ruled my objections and insisted upon purchasing a piece that I adamantly opposed. The piece in question was an end-table for the living-room, a table which I told her repeatedly would clash badly with the furniture we already had in that room, and especially with the coffee-table. But she wanted the thing, and she wasn't going to take no for an answer. And it was her insistence upon buying that table—her insistence combined with my own failure of will, I suppose, my failure to stand up for my own better judgment—that was to set off a series of strange and unusual events. It was to set off a clash which went far beyond anything even I had predicted. A clash which went so far that you the reader may find some of what follows to be a bit hard to believe. But I assure you that everything contained in this story is literally true. Every word of it. It all happened in exactly the way I'm about to describe the events to you.

We got the end-table home and set it in its place, and while I immediately saw how it clashed with the coffee-table and the rest of the furniture, M seemed to find the thing quite attractive. Because evidently, she was focusing exclusively upon the table itself while ignoring the rest of the room. She wasn't stepping back to look at the larger picture. But I could see that picture, and I could see that the new table wasn't going to work out. I could see that it would never fit in.

And the extent to which I was right first began to reveal itself when the two of us came downstairs the following morning. When we came down to find the coffee-table covered with

marks and scratches, and with the new end-table similarly defaced. And upon seeing all that damage, we immediately placed the blame on our daughter C, though we found it hard to believe that such a little girl could have done so much damage in a single day, and especially to have done it without either of us having noticed. But still, she seemed like the only suspect.

So we buffed and polished the two tables as well as we could, and we hoped that would be the end of it as we vowed that from then on, we would keep a closer eye on C whenever she was in the room. But the next morning, we came downstairs only to find that the problem was far from being resolved as the two tables were once again covered with marks and scratches just like they had been on the previous day. Or perhaps the damage was even worse this time around. And since we were both convinced that this new damage couldn't possibly have been the work of C, we found ourselves faced with a mystery. And it was a mystery that seemed to defy logical explanation and to grow deeper by the day as we descended the stairs each morning only to discover new damage to the tables, new dents and new scratches that were appearing more quickly than the two of us were able to buff them out.

And in the end, it was only by accident that I ever managed to solve the mystery as there came a day when I misread the clock beside the bed and got up a couple of hours earlier than usual. And as I approached the stairs that morning, I could hear a terrible clamor coming from the living-room. I could hear the sound of wood striking wood. So stealthily descending those stairs, I poked my head into the room just in time to see the end-table go scurrying back to its assigned position. I saw it running back from where, evidently, it had been in the process of attacking the coffee-table.

I was a bit shocked at the sight, I suppose that goes without saying, because I'm not accustomed to seeing furniture move around a room all by itself. I'm more accustomed to furniture that stays where you put it. Furniture that stays in one place rather than going wandering about as it sees fit. But it didn't take me long to get over my shock, and as I turned on the light and surveyed the damage to both tables, I moved into a position to confront the end-table over its behavior. To demand an explanation from this piece which had clearly been the aggressor in the fight I had just aurally witnessed.

I told the table in no uncertain terms that its behavior was unacceptable. I told it that we ran a non-violent household and that if it couldn't control its aggressive urges, it would have to leave. I told it that there was no room in our house for a piece of furniture that behaved in the way it had just been behaving. I told it that, and I told it more, and I even nudged it with my hand a few times and picked up one end. Anything to get a reaction from the end-table. Anything to get an acknowledgement that it was aware of what I was telling it, or at least that it was aware of the anger in my tone and of my clear disapproval of its behavior. But the entire time I was speaking, it gave not the least response. Instead it sat completely still, making no discernable movement. It sat in silence, of course, and it sat in the absolute immobility that we normally associate with furniture.

I discussed the matter with M when she got up later that morning, and though she seemed a bit incredulous when she heard what I had to say about the end-table attacking the other table, she finally agreed that perhaps it would be a good idea to separate the two pieces of furniture. Perhaps it would be a good idea to put them in separate rooms since there seemed to be no other

way to stop the damage from occurring night after night. So given her agreement, I carried the end-table upstairs and put it in the spare room, and then just to make sure that it stayed where I'd put it, I closed the door leading into that room.

When I got up the next morning, though, it was only to find that the door to the spare room was ajar and the table was gone. And when I reached the living-room downstairs, I immediately saw the end-table sitting back in its old position beside the sofa. I saw it sitting there, and I saw fresh marks on both it and the coffee-table.

Now this was getting to be too much, I told myself, and if that table was going to go opening doors and walking downstairs then there was nothing left for me to do but take even sterner measures with it. To lock it up inside the room or tie it down. To do something. It was time for me to do whatever it took to stop that table from returning to the living-room ever again. And the anger poured out in my voice as I made my threats to the end-table. As I told it exactly what I intended to do.

But then as I bent down to pick it up, it suddenly broke its long silence and spoke to me in a raspy, wooden-table voice. "Why are you threatening *me*?" it asked in a tone that was hard to decipher, one that could have been whining or could have been indignation. It was hard to tell since I'd never before tried to read the emotions of a piece of furniture. "Why don't you take that coffee-table upstairs? Why don't you punish *it* when it's the fat-base that started all this?"

"It started it...?" I answered hesitantly, not sure whether I was more shocked at hearing a piece of furniture speak out loud or at hearing the way it was trying to place all the blame on that sweet, innocent-looking coffee-table.

"Yeah, everything that's happened around here is its fault, and that's because of the things it keeps saying to me. The way it keeps teasing me and calling me names and insulting me," the table went on.

"It insults you?"

"Yeah, whenever there's no one around, it starts in on me. It starts saying things about me and calling me names. Like you know what it calls me? It calls me Endy!"

"Endy...?" That didn't sound like such a terrible insult to me.

"And it says stuff like, 'Hey, where's your other end, fella?' and like, 'A coffee-table is worth two end-tables put together.' And it laughs at me cause I'm only one end-table, and it... Oh, I just want to go over there and break that thing up into kindling!"

"Now take it easy," I said as the table started to creep forward. "I'll try to get to the bottom of this." And then as I turned to the coffee-table, I asked it point-blank, "So is any of this true? Have you been calling the end-table names?"

But as I stood and awaited a reply, the coffee-table said absolutely nothing. It didn't speak, and it didn't move, but instead it sat immobile. It sat inanimate the way furniture is supposed to sit.

“Oh, it won’t talk to you,” the end-table rasped out. “It’ll pretend like it can’t talk, and it’ll sit there like some innocent little... some little... It’ll pretend like it didn’t do anything. That goddamned veneer-face!”

“Hey, take it easy there!” I warned the end-table as, in its excitement, it edged ever closer to its rival. “I won’t have anymore fighting around here. Not in this house! And I... But you know, that coffee-table isn’t a veneer, so I don’t know why you called it that. It’s solid wood.”

“Ha!!” the end-table blurted out in defiance. “That’s what you think!”

“Well, whatever the case may be, I’m warning you right here and now that if you insist upon fighting, it’s *you* that’s gonna be outa here!”

“Me...?!”

“Yes you! Because you’re the newcomer around here, so it’s up to you to fit in with the other furniture. It’s not up to the coffee-table. It’s up to you!”

“Me...?” the table’s voice was softening a bit now, starting to become more docile.

“Yes, if any table has to leave this room, it’s you. Because not only has the coffee-table been here longer, but we also need it more than we need you.”

“Because I’m worthless?” the end-table began in what sounded like a tone of offended dignity. “Because a coffee-table is worth more than an end-table?”

“No, I didn’t say that,” I quickly reassured the table. Because at that moment, I seemed to hear such undisguised anguish in its voice, the sound of its having been deeply offended by my careless remark. It was a sound something like the cry you hear from a tree when the logger’s ax strikes it. That cry of wooden pain. So it wasn’t long before I backed off and began to look for a compromise. “I tell you what I’ll do. I’ll give you one more chance, okay?”

“One chance...?”

“Yes, one last chance for you to learn to get along. One chance for you to learn to control your temper and stop attacking the coffee-table. And no matter what it says to you, you have to take it. Do you understand? You have to...”

“I have to turn the other edge-piece?” the table helped me finish the phrase.

“Yes, to uh... You have to turn the other edge-piece, if that’s how you tables say it.”

“I will. I promise!” the table rasped out in what I hoped was an earnest tone.

“So remember, if it strikes you on one edge-piece, you’ll turn the other one, right?” I continued with my biblical paraphrase. “And if it strikes you on that edge-piece, then what?”

“Well, I’ll just turn another one, that’s all. Cause remember, we tables have four edge-pieces, so we don’t run out of them nearly as quickly as you humans run out of cheeks.”

“Right, you’ll turn another one,” I quickly conceded even though I didn’t feel completely convinced. Because there was something about the way it had rasped out that last statement. Something that sounded a bit flippant to me, or perhaps just a little too cute. Something that gave me doubts about the table’s sincerity, though given the fact that it was the first table with which I’d ever spoken, I had no way of knowing whether my doubts were warranted or not.

First thing next morning, though, I was to find that my doubts had indeed been warranted as no sooner had I reached the living-room than I saw that both tables were totally covered with scratches. And at the same time, I could see that the coffee-table had been moved a short distance and that deep grooves had been worn into the carpet. And as I looked at the direction in which those grooves ran, it quickly became apparent that the end-table had been trying to drag the coffee-table upstairs during the night. That it had been trying to remove its rival from the room through sheer force.

Well, that was too much for me, and I spoke angrily to the end-table as I went over and grabbed hold of it. “Your last chance is over, fella, and you blew it!”

“But aren’t you gonna listen to my side of the story?” it rasped out as it squirmed to get out of my hands and it kicked its legs. As it tried to stop me from carrying it to its final resting place upstairs. “Aren’t you gonna give me a chance to tell you what happened?”

“No, I’m not,” I responded with cold determination.

“Not even when I tell you that it called me the T-word?!!” the table rasped in its loudest, most desperate voice.

“The T-word?” There was something about that expression that made me hesitate for a moment. “It called you the T-word?”

“Yes it did. Right to my table-top!”

“The T-word... What’s that? What’s the T-word?”

“You don’t know?” the table began. “Well, maybe it’s best that you don’t.”

“But what is it?” I insisted. I had to know what this four-letter furniture word could possibly be.

“It’s... It’s... Oh, it’s the worst insult you can ever call a table, that’s what it is. And it’s such a bad word that any decent table like me would never repeat it. Never!”

“But what is it exactly?”

“I told you, it’s too dirty. I can’t say a word like that out loud. I can’t even think it! It’s just... It’s the T-word!!”

Seeing that my curiosity would never be satisfied, it wasn’t long before my hesitation ceased and I resumed the task of carrying the table upstairs. And as I went along, holding it fast

in spite of its struggles, I completely ignored what it had to say from that point on. I ignored its protests that no self-respecting table should be expected to take the T-word sitting down, and that any table that would use such an expression on another one—any table like that coffee-table—should be broken up into firewood and burned. I ignored those pleas and whatever else it had to say, and it wasn't long before I set the table down in the spare room. And then once it was there, I closed and locked the door with that trouble-making table inside. I locked it up where it could never cause anymore problems. Or at least where I thought it couldn't cause problems, though as I was to learn later on that day, there was still more trouble to come. There was much more.

The rest of the morning transpired in a normal enough manner. It began with me dropping off M at the school where she was studying English and dropping C at her daycare, and then being that I was on vacation myself, my next move was to return home. And once there, I changed into my work clothes and went to spend the morning in my workshop out in the detached garage. And it was only later, when I returned to the house to prepare my midday meal, that the first sign of trouble made its appearance. It was a big sign, though, a thoroughly alarming one, as when I returned to the kitchen after having washed-up for lunch, I looked out the window toward the driveway just in time to see our car being driven off down the street.

“Hey, stop!” I started to yell, but then I quickly suppressed the cry knowing that it was already too late. Our car was gone, and there was no way I could catch the thief now.

But who would have done something like that? I asked myself. Steal our car right out of the driveway and do so in broad daylight? Who could be so bold? Who could be so reckless? And then how exactly had he done it? Had he smashed the window and hot-wired it? Or had he...?

On a hunch, I went over to check my good clothes, and when I did so, I found that the keys were missing from the pocket of my pants. They were gone! Someone had taken them. Someone had actually snuck all the way into the house and taken my keys and used them to steal the car. That was incredible! It was unbelievable. It was...

How was it that anyone would have the gall to do something like that? I went back to posing questions to myself. Who could possibly be so crazy? And then all at once, another hunch came to me: the end-table! It was the only thing around there that was crazy and impulsive enough to have done something like that. And sure enough when I reached the spare room upstairs, I found that the table was gone. I found that it had somehow managed to pick the lock on the door and then gone downstairs and taken my keys and, evidently after hiding somewhere until I came into the house, it had finally jumped into the car and driven off with it. It had stolen the car! The end-table had!! It had driven off and left me stranded.

I prepared to call 911 and send the police after that trouble-making table, but then I began to have second thoughts. Because what would they think when I told them that a table had stolen my car? Would they believe me? No way! They'd think I was crazy, that's what they'd think. They'd think it was me who should be locked up! So in the end, I didn't make the call. I didn't raise the alarm seeking help from the law. And instead, I sat around and waited and hoped that sooner or later, the table would return of its own accord.

And it was about an hour later that my hopes were fulfilled as, upon hearing a loud, wooden banging upon the front door, I opened it to find the end-table standing there waiting to be let inside. I saw the table, and I saw the car sitting back in its place in the driveway. But before I could yell at the table and demand the return of my keys, it spoke to me in a voice that seemed the very embodiment of defeat and discouragement. “They wouldn’t take me back,” it rasped pathetically at me.

“They...? Who? Who wouldn’t take you back?”

“The people at the furniture store. They said I was too beat up for them to take me back. They said my owner had abused me too much,” it went on, inclining its table-top toward me in an accusing way.

“Me?! You’re saying *I* abused you?”

“Well, it sure wasn’t Santa Claus!”

“I... You say I...” I was at a complete loss at that moment, not knowing how to respond to such an outrageously false accusation as that. Because I hadn’t done a thing to that table. Not a thing! All I’d done was separate it from the coffee-table. All I’d done was try to prevent the damage from occurring.

“So they won’t take me back, and they won’t help me find a better home. They won’t help me find a place where I won’t be abused,” the table went on, seeming to relish its role of poor, helpless victim.

But then it made the mistake of going too far in the role it was playing as it hung its table-top and whimpered for sympathy. Because by halting its stream of accusations, it gave me a chance to regroup my thoughts and prepare for a counter-attack. And the attack wasn’t long in coming. “Who told you you could take the car, anyway? Who gave you permission? Because it’s not your car, you know. It’s my car! Mine and M’s. And if you take it without our permission, that’s... That’s grand theft auto! That’s what it is!”

“Well, I uh...” This time, it was the end-table that was at a loss for words. So I pushed on with my advantage.

“You can’t go taking people’s cars whenever you feel like it, you know. You have to ask them for permission. And besides, you don’t have a driver’s license! You’re not supposed to drive *any* car.”

“Oh, I don’t need a license,” the table shot back quickly, blunting my attack and throwing me off-balance once again.

“You don’t need one?”

“No, I’m not a person, remember? I’m a table, so I don’t need one. Because driver’s licenses are only for people. They’re not for furniture.”

“But you do! You have to. Everyone needs a license.”

“Not furniture! Cause check it out. It doesn’t say a thing in the law about furniture. It just says people. And tell me, when was the last time you saw a chair with a driver’s license, huh?”

“A chair...?” The end-table had me on that one, and if only it had pressed its advantage at that point, it might have taken me completely out of the argument. But instead of charging ahead, it repeated its earlier mistake by pausing for a second time. It paused to revel in the glory that came from its belief that it had defeated me on the driver’s license question. It paused and gave me the chance to prepare yet another counter-attack. “But you know, furniture is not supposed to drive cars! That’s something people are supposed to do, not tables! Because tables’ only job is to sit in one place and do nothing. It’s not to drive cars, and it’s not to open doors, and it’s not to walk downstairs, and it’s sure as heck not to attack other tables! It’s to sit in one place and act like tables!!”

I was sure that the vehemence and thoroughness of this latest attack of mine would finally win the argument for me. That it would leave the table so stunned by my logic that it would be unable to respond. That now it would have to give up the fight once and for all. But oh how wrong I turned out to be! Because no sooner had I finished my last sentence than the end-table came right back at me, attacking me in what had to be the most bitter tone of wounded wooden pride I’d ever heard, “You animate-chauvinist pig, you! You’re a disgrace!!”

“Me?!!” How was it that I was suddenly back on the defensive?

“Yes, you! You think that tables have no rights! You think we’re just here to serve you. You think the only thing we should do is sit in the spot where you put us, right? Sit there and serve our great master. Our human... ha! You think all we should do is sit there and let you put your things on us, let you clutter us up with your junk. Let you spill your drinks on us!!”

I was completely taken aback by the ferocity of its attack, and all I could do was stand in silence as it went on.

“You can’t accept the notion of furniture-rights, can you?... Now can you?! And I’ll bet that on top of all that, you’re a specyist, too, aren’t you? I’ll bet you believe that humans have more rights than animals, don’t you?... Well don’t you?!!”

“Yes, I guess so...” I started to mumble out, responding to the question it had put to me so insistently. But then before I could say anymore, it cut me off once again.

“Oh, I knew it! A specyist and an animate-chauvinist! What a combination!! What a badge of ignorance! What a... So wouldn’t you know it would be just my luck to be sold to someone like you? A specyist and an animate-chauvinist. Yuck!!”

Was I really a specyist? And was I an animate-chauvinist? I couldn’t say exactly since I’d never heard those terms before that day. I’d never heard them, and I’d never given the questions any thought. So how could I possibly know where I stood? Because it wasn’t like the table had called me a racist or a sexist, labels I would have disputed in an instant since neither of them applies to me in any way. But specyist? What did that even mean?

Well, it wasn't long before the end-table finished venting its fury on me, and when it did, I let the whole thing drop. I didn't renew my attacks, and I didn't even insist upon having my way. I didn't insist upon the table sitting in one place or maintaining its silence. And instead, I began to look for some sort of compromise, some graceful way out of our untenable situation.

And what I eventually decided to do was to wait for M to get home and then talk to her about finding a new home for the end-table. So we talked and I tried to convince her that we should sell the table or give it away since that was the only way we'd ever be able to stop the damage that kept occurring to it and the coffee-table day after day. And while in the discussion I left out any mention of the way the end-table had taken our car, I also kept quiet about its having spoken to me. I didn't tell her that part of the story since I wasn't sure that she would believe me. I didn't tell her any of the things it had said to me or any of the names it had called me—animate-chauvinist pig, indeed! But even without bringing up those bits of information, in the end I managed to convince her that the table would have to go, that it had never really fit in anyway, and that the best thing we could do was to give it away.

And the next day, that was precisely what we set out to do. We set out to find a new home for that end-table. A better home I hoped, one where the people were more enlightened than me when it came to the issue of furniture-rights. One where they would treat the table with the respect it deserved. So what we did was we buffed it and polished it and got it looking as pretty as we could, and then we carried it out and set it near the curb with a sign saying, "Free." And as I said goodbye to the end-table, I wished it all the luck. I wished it happiness in whatever home it eventually found. And then as I was about to wish it a good life, I caught myself just in time and instead I wished it a happy existence.

Well, it wasn't long before the end-table disappeared from our curb and from our lives forever. But while the table may be gone, it's far from being forgotten. And in fact, I think about what it had to say all the time now. I think of it whenever I move a piece of furniture, or even when I sit down on a chair. I ask myself if I might be violating the dresser's rights by moving it without first asking its permission. Or am I exploiting the chair by subjecting it to the weight of my body, and especially when I'm applying the least-polite part of my anatomy to that chair? I ask myself those questions, and I also ask, Am I really an animate-chauvinist? Do I really discriminate against inanimate objects? I hope I don't, and I know that ever since my days with that end-table, I've made a conscious effort to be fair and open-minded toward them. I've made an effort to treat inanimate objects as my equals.

But while I've achieved a certain level of peace-of-mind regarding most of the questions that were presented to me by the end-table, there's one thing that continues to bother me. One question that still remains unresolved. And that question is the following: Is it really legal for furniture to drive without a license?

REAL MATH

Two plus two makes five. You know that, don't you? You're aware of that fact? Or are you one of those sheep? One of those brainwashed fools who say, "They told me in school that it makes four, so that's what it makes," and you never try to think for yourself. You never take the time to figure out what it really makes. Cause if you did, you'd know that two plus two doesn't make four. It makes five. And I can prove it, too!

Two plus two makes five, and three plus three makes seven, and... What's that you say? You say for me to go ahead and prove it? Is that what you say? Well, no I won't!! That's what I say! I'm not gonna prove it! Especially not when you ask me that way. Cause just because I know how to do it doesn't mean that I have to whenever some a-hole like you asks me to. I don't have to prove it if I don't want to, and it just so happens that I don't feel like it right now. So there! Take that for your proof!!

So like I was saying, two plus two makes five, and three plus three makes seven, those are easy ones. But then what about a harder question? What about two plus two plus two? What does that make? Is it seven or is it eight? Or is it...? Well, to tell you the truth, I haven't quite got that one figured out yet. Cause it's kinda complicated, you see. It's like... I mean, it could be seven and it could be eight since there are two different ways of looking at the problem. And I'm still not sure which of those ways is the right one. But I'll figure it out one of these days. I'll come up with the right answer, and when I do, then you'll see! You'll see what real math is all about. And I mean *real* math, not that idiot-math they teach you in school! Not that two plus two makes four bullshit. *Real* math!!

I just need a little more time to work on it, that's all. I need more time to think about it and do the calculations in my head and to, uh... Cause you'd be amazed at what you can come up with when you start thinking about things like that real deeply while you're standing one of those quiet night-watches out at sea.

Oh, I forgot to mention that I'm a seaman, didn't I? And I'm not all that bad a one either, no matter what certain people may have to say on the subject. Cause I can do the job! I've been doing it for years, and I can keep right on doing it. And if any of those captains don't like the way I do it, they're gonna have to fire me is what they're gonna have to do. Cause that's the only way they're ever gonna get rid of me! Ain't no one gonna run me off a ship unless I wanta get off! No one!! They're never gonna make me quit a job unless I feel like it. And even if I do quit on one ship, I'll just go back down to the union hall and get another one. And a better ship, too! And I'll...

Hey, I'm getting away from what I was talking about, aren't I? Cause this story isn't about those assholes who try to run me off the ships. It's about... But tell me, why does it bother them so much when I tell them the truth? Huh? Why does it bother those captains when I come right out and say that they're wrong when they're wrong? Cause that's all it's ever about, and all that other stuff they say about me, all that crazy stuff, well it's not true. They're just making it up. Cause I never... I don't really space out that bad. Not like they say. And I don't... I mean, I talk to myself, sure, but that doesn't mean I'm crazy. Cause I'm not! I'm not crazy and I don't... But enough about that stuff, okay? Cause that's not what I'm here to talk about. No, what I

wanta talk about is those watches, those long, quiet night-watches when there's nothing else to do up on that bridge but stand around and look at the dark horizon and think.

And you know, you'd be amazed at some of the things you can figure out when you stand there staring out at the darkness like that! Cause like the bridge itself is almost completely black with the only light coming from the radar screens and other equipment like that. But even those are turned way down dim so they won't bother your night-vision. Cause you can't go around with headlights out at sea, you know. The ocean is way too big for that. So what you do is you get your eyes adjusted to the dark, and then you watch for lights off in the distance. And maybe even dark shapes, too, since you can sometimes see those if your eyes are adjusted well enough.

The most important thing to me, though, is the ideas I can come up with when I'm standing there in the dark like that. When I'm standing there with nothing but my own thoughts to keep me company since most of those watch-partners of mine are a bunch of dull, boring... And also since most of the time at sea, there's nothing to see and no other ships around. Nothing and no one. Nothing but me and the darkness. And for me, the darker it is, the better. Cause like it's not all that easy to work on heavy ideas when you've got the moon shining in your face. And even the stars can bother you a little bit, as bright as they are out there at sea. But man, there's nothing like a dark, overcast night for thinking! A night when you can see what the color black really looks like.

And have I ever had some great ideas when I was out there! Ideas like you just wouldn't believe!! Ideas like... Well, it's not all that head-in-the-clouds intellectual stuff like I was just talking about before. Cause no matter what I may seem like to you, I'm not just another intellectual. I'm actually a very practical person. I'm a guy who likes to work on practical ideas that I can prove in the physical world and not just on paper. Ideas that I can take home with me to my workshop when I get off the ship, and where I can go out and make inventions that prove them. And I mean prove those ideas beyond a shadow of a doubt! Prove them to where no one can argue with me ever again!

But you know how so many people are, don't you? The way they refuse to believe the truth even when it stares them right in the face. The way they prefer to cling to their mistaken ideas and their ignorance. Cause I mean, they act like those idiot-math ideas of theirs were the most important things in the world. Like those ideas were the foundations of their whole system of science or something like that. So even when I show the truth to people like that, they still refuse to believe me. They refuse to believe the proof I'm holding right there in front of them. And instead, they cling to their stupidity and their...!

So tell me, are you one of them? Are you one of those people who refuse to learn? Cause if you are, you may as well stop reading this paper right here and now. This stuff isn't for you. This stuff I'm gonna be talking about. So stop, okay?! Stop reading!! Stop right now!!!

Okay, good. Now that I know you're not one of those types, I can talk to you a bit more freely. Like the way I talk to someone with an open-mind. And the first thing I want to tell you about is one of the inventions I came up with in that workshop of mine a few years back. It was one of the ideas I thought up when I was out at sea and then came home and made something to prove to the world that I was right and everyone else was wrong. And what I made was a

compass, a brand new type of compass. Cause you know how the old ones they use only have four cardinal directions on them, right? North, South, East and West. Well, I came up with a compass that had five directions. And I'm not talking about that fifth direction being up or down or anything stupid like that. No, what I'm talking about is a compass that included the direction I call Quarth. (Get it? The name sounds kinda like quark. And it's a good name for that direction, too, since it's kinda like the quark dimension.)

So anyway, I made this compass and then I showed it around to different people I know, but was there one of them that got what it was all about? Not a one! Zip, zilch, nobody!! They all acted like they thought it was weird or something. Like they just didn't get it! So after awhile, I went back out to the workshop and tried to add the sixth direction to that compass, too, the direction I call Twist for reasons that would be pretty obvious if only I could have made the thing work out. But that's just the problem, you see, is that I never could do it. I never could make a six-direction compass no matter how hard I tried. And finally I had to give it up.

But hey, five outa six ain't bad, is it? And it's a helluva lot better than four outa six, wouldn't you say? And it was... I mean, it made those old-style four-direction compasses look like a bunch of toys, that's what it did.

Lately though, I came up with something that's even better than that compass. I came up with an invention that worked out all the way this time and not just partway like that compass did. I came up with something that proves one of my ideas so clearly that you'd have to be a complete idiot to argue with me about it anymore. You'd have to be as stupid as... as... Well as stupid as all those people I showed it to, that's how stupid you'd have to be. And I hope you're not as stupid as them, are you? I hope you can believe the truth when I tell you about it. And I also hope you're done questioning me about that two plus two stuff. Are you?!

Well okay then, as long as you keep quiet and don't interrupt me, I'll tell you about my latest invention. I'll tell you how I... Like you know how it is that the dice you buy in a store always have six sides on them, don't you? The way the numbers go one-through-six. Well, that's okay since they're nothing but a bunch of toys, so there's nothing wrong with them only having six sides. Cause they're not real dice and they're not real cubes. They can't be since real cubes have seven sides, as I worked it out in my head while I was out on my last ship. And then what I did when I got home this vacation was I went right out to the workshop and started working on ways to make a seven-sided dice—or is it called a die? I'm not sure what the right word is. But whatever it is, I set out to make a seven-sided one during this latest vacation.

And I tell you, it wasn't an easy thing to do, either. Not a bit. Cause if it was easy, then everyone would be making them, wouldn't they? They'd be making and selling seven-sided dice in the stores all the time instead of those little six-sided toys. But as hard as it turned out to be, I refused to give up on it. And I spent days and weeks at that workbench of mine, cutting and shaping pieces of wood and trying to figure out a method where I could produce a seven-sided cube. But the whole time I was at it, all I managed to do was to waste a lot of wood and make a whole bunch of six-sided cubes that we'll have to burn in the fireplace this winter.

And I tried every method I could think of, too. Like I tried the upside-down/out-and-in/center-on-the-bottom method, and I even tried the upside-up-and-in/downside-left/outside-

right/inside-down-the-middle method and lots of other fancy and sophisticated ideas I'd come up with back when I was on the ship. But not one of them worked, and it wasn't until the very end, right when I was about to give up on the whole thing, that I finally came up with a method that did. And wouldn't you know that as it turned out, the correct method was the simplest one of all. It was the very first method that came into my head back when I was on the ship, the first method I came up with before I left it behind as I moved on to what I thought were better ideas. But in the end, it turned out to be the simple and straight-forward downside-up/outside-inside method that produced the seven-sided cube. The world's first seven-side cube!! As far as I know, anyway.

Well, I was awful excited about it as I carved the numbers onto the different sides of that dice—or that die—as I carved the numbers one-through-seven. And then once I was done, I could hardly wait for my wife M to get home from work so I could show it to her. So I could make her the first person besides me to see the first *real* cube ever made by a human being. So I could...

But you know what she said to me when she saw it? She said, "Is that a toy?" "A toy?!" I shot back at her. "Are you kidding? Just take a look at the numbers on it!" Cause if you don't look at the numbers, a seven-sided dice—or die—looks just like a six-sided one. So I showed her the number seven. But you know what she said to that? She said, "Oh, that's cute." Cute!! That's what she said! She said it was cute!!! "Which number did you leave out?" she asked me next. "I didn't leave anything out," I told her, and then I turned the thing over in my hands and showed her all the numbers, one-through-seven. But the only thing she had to say when she saw all those numbers was, "Okay, what's the trick?" The trick!! She asked me what the trick was! Like that dice—or that die—or whatever you call it... That... What's the right word for it?

Oh, whatever the word is, it doesn't matter, cause I never could convince her about how many sides it actually had. I couldn't convince her that it wasn't a trick, that it was a real, true, flesh-and-blood, seven-sided cube. Or at least that it was a real wooden seven-sided cube. And I just... I mean, how do you convince someone when they refuse to see what's right there in front of their face or what they're holding in their hands, huh? How do you do it? And as it turned out, M wasn't the only person who reacted that way when they saw the thing, either. Cause in fact, every one of them I showed it to asked me the exact same question, "What's the trick?" like they were part of a conspiracy or something. And you know what? I think they *are* part of a conspiracy. A conspiracy of ignorance and stupidity! A conspiracy to undermine someone like me who can see the way things really are!

I showed it to just about everyone I know around this town, but there wasn't one of them could understand what it was all about. So finally, I decided to mail the di... the cube to my brother the scientist to see what he had to say about it. But he... Well, you talk about someone being brainwashed!! Cause he's about as brainwashed as they come what with all the years he spent having idiot-math and idiot-science pounded into his head day after day after day, first at the university and now at the place where he works. So I probably should have known better than to have tried talking to him about *real* science.

And he was so damned irritating about it, too, with the way he kept laughing at the things I had to say about real science—and the way I kept hanging up on him whenever he did! And

hanging up hard! Cause he was so... I mean, what did he think, huh? Did he think I was kidding? And couldn't he even see that seven-sided dice—or die or whatever—that he was holding right there in his hand? Couldn't he see reality? Couldn't he see anything besides those stupid ideas that had been pounded into his head for so many years? Those ideas that he treats like the cornerstones of math and science. But those ideas that are wrong! Dead wrong!!

No, he couldn't see it as it turns out. And when he finally realized that I was serious in what I had to say and stopped laughing at my ideas, the next thing he wanted to do was he wanted to argue with me. He wanted to defend his idiot-math ideas. He wanted to argue that cubes only have six sides even though there was a seven-sided cube right there in front of him. Right in his hand! And he wanted to argue when I happened to mention that two plus two makes five, too. He wanted to... Oh, it was so frustrating talking with him! Cause he's so...

But you're not as closed-minded as him, are you? I hope you're not. I hope you can see that I'm right about this stuff and everyone else is wrong. Because if I can just convince one other person, then maybe between the six of us, we can... But what's that you say? You say you won't believe anything I tell you until after I prove that two plus two makes five? Is that what you say?

Hell, no!! I won't do it! I already told you I wouldn't. And when I say something, I mean it. So if you...

And anyway, what about you? Why don't you prove to me that two plus two makes four, huh?! Why don't you show me how you can take a two and another two and make them add up to anything without someone there to go through the process of adding them up? Why don't you show me that one, huh?! Why don't you show me those magic twos of yours that can add themselves up without any help? Why don't you show them to me, huh?! Huh?! I know why you don't. It's because you can't! That's why! You can't do it!! Cause there ain't no such twos!!

FAMILY ROAD TRIP

There was something strange about the road signs they were passing. C could sense it from where she sat in the backseat of her parents' station-wagon. She could feel something, some sixth-sense telling her that things were not quite as they should be. But as she looked around, she saw nothing out of the ordinary. She saw her little brother E strapped into his car-seat beside her, playing with some toy in his lap, some sort of draw-and-erase toy that was absorbing all his attention for the moment. A toy that—mercifully—kept that irritating little brat from bothering her where she sat listening to the CD player she'd gotten for her latest birthday. And meanwhile up in the front seats, all she could see were the backs of her parents' heads as they sat and looked out at the road ahead.

So maybe she'd been imagining that feeling after all. Maybe there was nothing going on. Maybe everything was... But then as she read what was written on the next sign they passed, her suspicions were suddenly confirmed. Because at the top of the list of towns on that sign was the name Eugene followed by a distance of not very many miles. Eugene! The sign said they were coming up on Eugene even though she knew that they'd already passed it the day before.

"Are we going the right way?" she asked her parents after removing her ear-phones.

"What's that, kid?" her father G responded, inclining his head slightly after briefly glancing at her in the rear-view mirror.

"I just asked if we're going the right way."

"The right way...? Yes, of course we are. We're... What do you think? You think we're going north instead of south?"

"Well..."

"Well, we're not. Cause if we were going north, we'd be in Canada by now," G went on in that obnoxious, know-it-all tone of his. "We'd be across the border. So of course we're going the right way."

"Okay, I was just..." Whatever!! I was just asking a question, that's all. I wasn't asking to be made fun of. I just wanted to know... But then as C reinserted her ear-phones and tuned her father's humorless teasing back out of her mind, another thought suddenly hit her. Because what did he mean about them being in Canada by now? After they'd spent last night in that motel in southern Oregon?! There was no way they'd be in Canada by now if they were driving north instead of south. No, they'd be somewhere like... like say Eugene! They'd be somewhere like where that sign had just said they were!

So C decided that from then on, while sitting quietly and listening to her favorite CD, she would also keep an eye on where exactly they were going. She would watch the road-signs and make sure that her father was right after all. That father of hers who could never admit it when he was wrong. She would keep an eye on him and make sure that he really was right—for once!—

and that they were actually heading south, in the direction of Grandma and Grandpa's house. She would make sure that her father wasn't spacing out or something.

And the next sign she saw did a great deal to calm her fears since it contained a list of towns in northern California with the last name on the list being Sacramento. And along with the name, it gave a distance to go, one that seemed about right to her when she considered how long they had been driving that day. So I guess that means there's nothing wrong after all, she told herself. It means that we're really on our way to Grandma and Grandpa's house like we're supposed to be, and we're not heading north or anything like that. And whatever that last sign was all about, that sign to Eugene, it was... Well, it was irrelevant, that's what it was, since we're actually in California where we're supposed to be. And so starting to feel relaxed once again, C paid less attention to the next few signs they passed.

But then after riding sleepily along for some time, she saw a sign whose contents shocked her out of her daydreams and propelled her thoughts back to the present. Because that sign showed a distance to go to Salem, a town even farther north than Eugene. And to make things even stranger, the name Eugene appeared on the sign as well, but it appeared below that of Salem! It appeared as coming after Salem, which could mean only one thing: It meant that they were heading south all right, but that somehow they were now in far northern Oregon! They were... No, it was impossible!!

C took her ear-phones back out and got ready to voice her concerns, and as she did so, she made sure to direct her question to her mother M rather than throwing it out as a general comment. Because she hoped that by doing so, she might be able to keep her father from butting his big nose into the conversation. "Do you know how much more we have to go?" she asked her mother in Catalan.

"A lot," M replied in the same language. "Are you getting tired? Do you want to rest a little?"

"I guess..."

"Well, maybe soon..."

"But you know, we shouldn't stop as long as E is keeping himself so well entertained," G butted into the conversation, speaking in English and demonstrating his usual lack of tact and common sense. Because no sooner had E heard himself mentioned than he was setting his drawing-toy aside and joining in on the conversation.

"I wanta stop! I wanta stop!" he began to chant, and his voice grew more insistent with each repetition. "I'm hungry!"

"Okay, we'll stop pretty soon," G answered his son. And then he turned his head slightly to see M making a gesture at him like, See what you did now?!

"Let's stop!" E insisted. "I wanta stop now! I wanta play soccer!"

"Okay, we will," G attempted to calm him. "We'll stop real soon."

“Now! Let’s stop now!!”

“At the next Rest Area, okay? We’ll stop at the next one we come to,” G quickly relented. And then as his son cheered the decision, his wife shook her head in wordless disgust at the mess he had just made of their calm, quiet drive.

And as far as C was concerned, she sat listening in gloomy silence, angry at the way her conversation with her mother had been hijacked by the two irritating members of the family. Or at least her brother was irritating, about as irritating as a little kid can be, while her father was more like... He was embarrassing, that’s what he was. He was embarrassing to have around, and he was especially embarrassing whenever she was forced to admit in public that she was related to him.

They pulled into a Rest Area a short time later, and the moment she saw the place, C recognized it as the same Rest Area where they’d stopped to eat lunch the day before. It was the exact same place! And the only thing different this time around was the fact that they parked in a slightly different spot from where they had the last time and that they chose a different table at which to eat.

And with apparently no one but C being aware of the fact that the events of the previous day were being repeated—repeated though not exactly so—they grabbed the cooler and picnic basket out of the back of the car and carried them over to their chosen table. And once that was done, the two males in the family ran off to an open area some distance away to kick their soccer ball around, just like they had the day before, while C and her mother stayed to set up the meal. And seeing that now she had a chance to speak with her mother alone—without any obnoxious boys or loud-mouthed men around to butt in and interrupt them—C decided to break the pattern of the previous day in a more profound way by bringing up the subject that was weighing so heavily upon her mind. “Where are we?” she asked in a tone that seemed to imply something deeper than the words themselves signified.

“We’re in Oregon, of course. Somewhere around the middle of Oregon,” was M’s simple and straightforward response.

“But why are we here? Why aren’t we in California yet?”

“California?! We won’t be in California until tomorrow,” M replied in surprise upon hearing such a question coming from an old and experienced traveler like her daughter. “We’ll be sleeping in southern Oregon tonight, and then we’ll be in California tomorrow.”

“But we already did that!” C blurted out.

“We did what? We...”

“We already slept in Oregon last night, so we’re supposed to be in California today!” C insisted.

“We what?! We slept in Oregon?” M didn’t know where her daughter could have come up with such a crazy idea, and she asked herself what she could possibly be talking about.

“Yes, we did! Last night!! And we ate lunch right here yesterday, too! We ate right here in this same place!”

“We ate here? We weren’t here yesterday,” M told her daughter firmly. “We ate at home yesterday, and that’s where we slept, too,” she went on in as calm and soothing a voice as she could, given the circumstances.

“No, we weren’t at home!” C began to plead, but then she thought better of arguing the point any further, and she suddenly fell silent.

“Do you feel okay?” her mother asked with the growing concern at her daughter’s behavior showing in her voice. “Is there anything wrong?”

“No, nothing,” C said with an air of finality. She said it in a way that declared the conversation to be over. And then as she moved off a short distance to a place where she could find a little solitude, she asked herself what the heck could be going on around here. How was it that she was the only person in the family who could remember what they’d done the day before? How was it that even her mother couldn’t remember? That even she believed this to be the first day of their journey when it was actually the second?

Because her mother?! How could she not remember? Her mother who was the smart one in the family! Her mother who always understood everything and who was never fooled. Because with her father, it was understandable. He was easy enough to fool on just about anything, being so full of himself that he never knew what was going on. But her mother? She was way too smart for that! She couldn’t be fooled unless... Unless there was something strange happening to them! Something truly strange!!

C remained silent throughout the midday meal, and at the same time, she did her best to avoid the concerned glances that M periodically shot over in her direction. And instead of speaking, C spent her time trying to figure out what exactly was happening to all of them. Were they in some type of weird time-warp or what? Were they in some warp where time kept repeating itself? No, that couldn’t be the answer since things weren’t repeating themselves in any exact way. But instead, it was like... Like time was looping back on itself or like... Like it was in a spiral where it was repeating the patterns but not the details.

Like for instance, this time as they ate, they were sitting at a different table from yesterday, right? So that was different from the last loop, wasn’t it? They were in a slightly different place, and at the same time, the things people were saying weren’t exactly the same as they had been the day before, either. And the changes in the conversation weren’t simply due to the fact that C wasn’t participating this time around, not like she had the last time. No, there was a lot more to it than that. It was much more complicated. Because so much was being repeated, like all those stupid, little-kid things that E kept coming up with. Those were being repeated, or at least most of them were. And then what about her dad’s silly jokes and his dumb comments and observations? Yes, they were being repeated, too. More-or-less. But they weren’t... None of those things were exact duplicates. Nothing was quite the same. It was all...

Oh, what type of weird time-loop were they stuck in, anyway?!

C maintained her silence even after the meal was over and they had returned with their things to the car. And she only responded to her mother's periodic queries about her well-being with monosyllables, the same way she responded to her father's bad jokes and lame attempts at kidding. She maintained her silence as she sat in the back seat of the car with her ear-phones back in place, blasting away with her favorite music and drowning out any further chatter from that bunch of losers she was forced to call her family. And instead of paying attention to them, she concentrated upon watching the road and the signs they passed. She watched, and she asked herself what the heck was going on with this road-trip to nowhere. This trip that might go on forever.

As they drove along, the road-signs immediately began to act up on them once again. Because now they were in Medford and now they were in Redding and now they were in Centralia. And the only thing C could be thankful about as she watched that confusing parade of place-names was the fact that at least she wasn't seeing the names of any towns that didn't lay somewhere between her own house and that of her grandparents. At least none of the signs said Denver or New York or anything like that. No, all of them were places they would have to pass through sooner or later, and the only thing wrong was the order in which she saw them coming. But that order had gotten completely out-of-whack by now. It had gone completely crazy!

And in the same way that the names on the signs she was reading kept jumping all over the map, the landscape surrounding them was also changing just as erratically. It was jumping from one region to another without the least rhyme or reason. Jumping from farmland to forest and back to farmland again in little more than the blink of an eye. Jumping from the hills of southern Oregon to the featureless flatlands of California's central valley to somewhere else back in the north. And as C watched for the well-known mountains they had to pass along the way, those kept changing as well. Because one minute, she'd be looking out the window at Mount Shasta, but then a minute later, it would be Mount Hood. And after that, she might see Mount Saint Helens off in the distance only to be followed a short time later by another view of Shasta.

And then just when she thought that things couldn't possibly get any weirder, she saw a pair of road-signs that really sent her head spinning. Because what she saw first was an "Exit" sign, and then about a mile further down the road, she saw one reading "Exit 1 Mile." She saw that sign a mile *after* the exit, not a mile before it! Not like it was supposed to be! So what did that mean? she asked herself. Did it mean that time was starting to go backwards or what? Did it mean that while time might appear to be going forward, it was actually going the other way? That they were actually getting farther from their destination all the time rather than closer? What was this crazy game that time was playing on them now?!

As she asked herself those questions, C leaned forward to examine the side of her mother's face, trying to detect any signs that she might be aware of what was going on. That she might not be completely oblivious to all this strangeness as she sat there driving the car and staring out at the road ahead. And as something about the intensity of her daughter's gaze caught M's attention, she glanced briefly into the rear-view mirror before asking C quietly, "Are you tired?"

No, C shook her head, not having heard her mother's actual words thanks to the music blasting into her ears though clearly aware of those words' general import. And then just as G

was about to join the conversation by saying something about stopping, M's finger shot up to her mouth in the signal for silence, warning him not to say anything to disturb E who was deeply engaged right then with the toy he had in hand. And so with a look of apology on his face, G did exactly as he was told and turned back toward the road ahead, having been stopped before he could once again shatter the temporary peace of the journey.

It was quite some time after that, hours it seemed, before M finally pulled the car over onto a freeway off-ramp. She pulled onto the ramp that led to Grandma and Grandpa's house! C recognized it the moment she saw it. So they were there at last! she told herself with joy. The trip was finally over!! But then before she could say a single word and even before they'd reached the bottom of the off-ramp, she suddenly saw to her horror that they were no longer in the same place they'd just been. No, they weren't at the bottom of the off-ramp leading to Grandma and Grandpa's house at all. They were at the bottom of the one leading to the motel where they'd slept the night before! They were right back at that same place in southern Oregon! And that meant they were still stuck in those time-loops or whatever they were!! They were still no closer to their destination than they had been the previous day!

Pulling up to that same motel and walking inside to ask about a room, C saw that it was the same desk clerk waiting on them this time around. It was the same clerk saying the same things he'd said the day before—almost the same but not quite—and then handing them the key to a room that lay one or two doors down from the one where they'd stayed the last time. And throughout the process, the clerk gave not the least sign of having recognized them from the previous day. It was like he'd never seen them before. Like he had no more clue that they'd already been there than anyone else did. Anyone else but C, that is.

So they moved into their room, and they spent some time playing around in the motel's little gym, just like they had the day before. And after that, they got back into their car and drove to the same restaurant where they'd eaten before, and there they ordered the same food. Or at least three of them repeated their orders nearly word-for-word while C made sure to change hers completely, hoping that in that way, she might do something to break out of those strange time-loops or spirals or whatever it was that they were caught up in. Hoping she might do something to stop the endless repetition of the events of this day. Something to move them forward onto another day and onto a continuation of life as it's supposed to be lived.

Throughout the evening, C remained silent, and she also did her best to avoid her mother's solicitous glances. And whenever her mother spoke to her, asking how she was or what was on her mind, C responded more with grunts than with words. Because she had no idea what to say to her mother right then. No idea how to talk to her about what was going on when her mother was so completely unaware of the time-loops in which all of them had become trapped. The loops or the spirals or the squiggles or the curlicues or whatever shape it was that time had transformed itself into. Whatever form it was that time had taken now that it had abandoned its traditional linear form.

So C said virtually nothing to her mother throughout the meal, and she responded in exactly the same way when her father made an effort to draw her out. When, upon noticing her mother's concerned looks in combination with C's own grumpy silence, he decided to do something to cheer her up and make her laugh. When he decided to shower her with a series of

his stale jokes and his sorry attempts at kidding. And it wasn't long before those jokes were coming at her one after the other, those jokes she had outgrown somewhere back around the time she turned four. Those jokes that even E must have outgrown by now, as stupid and immature as he was. Those jokes that apparently only G himself had yet to outgrow. And the only time C came anywhere near to laughing at them was when she stopped to think about what a fool this father of hers was. So in the end, it was only after a great deal of effort on her part that she was ever able to come up with a weak pity-laugh for him at one of his jokes, a laugh that finally got him to shut up and leave her alone.

Once they were back in the motel room, C knew that there was nothing to do but go to bed and hope for the best. Hope that the next day they would somehow break out of the strange loops in which they were caught and back into the normal time she'd always known. Into the sort of time that flows along in a single direction from past to future. Into the sort of time that follows the straight line it's supposed to follow.

They were back on the road again the next morning. They were back on their way to California, or at least they were very briefly so, because no sooner had they reached the top of the on-ramp by the motel than time began to go haywire on them once again. It began to jump all around just like it had the day before. Or in fact, its jumping around was even worse on this day than it had been the day before. Because on this morning, they seemed to be going everywhere at once. They seemed to be in all three states of their journey at the same time, with the signs completely jumbled and mixed together, and with the scenery being much the same. Like for instance, there were times when there would be one type of scenery on one side of the car while on the other side there would be a whole different type. And C could see both of them at once when she wanted to, thanks to her peripheral vision. She could see both! And then what about the way time had run backward for a little while the day before? Well, that was nothing compared to what it was doing now. Because there came moments when time would not only be going backward, but it would be going forward, too. Simultaneously! It would be going in both directions at once! And that's not to mention the moments when it seemed to be going sideways.

And throughout that entire morning, amidst all the jumbled mess that time had become, there was only one thing that maintained any sort of straight-ahead, unidirectional coherence. That thing was C's mind. It was her internal narrative. Because her thoughts were the last thread of linear time that still existed in that strange world they now inhabited. They were the last thread which still single-handedly held the events together. And she knew that! She knew it deep inside. She knew that her mind and its stream of thoughts were the only things preventing all of them from being plunged into utter chaos. Plunged into a chaos of time from which they might never return!

C rode along, almost in a daze at all the weirdness that was taking place around her, and she used the music blasting into her ears not only to drown out whatever conversation might come from the other members of her family but also to help maintain her own sanity. Maintain that continuous line of thought and reason that she had always called her self. But then there came a moment when she heard a noise so loud that it rose even above the volume of her music.

"I wanta stop! I wanta stop!!" E chanted. And meanwhile, M stared daggers at G as he drove the car. "I wanta stop! I wanta eat!" E went on and on. And while C couldn't hear the

responses that came from her parents, it wasn't long before they were pulling off the freeway and pulling into a Rest Area. Pulling into the same Rest Area where they'd stopped the day before! And the day before that, too!!

Soon they were out of the car and setting up lunch at their chosen table, a table which turned out to be different from the ones they'd chosen on either of the last two days. And then once the males had gone off to kick their soccer ball around, leaving C alone with her mother, she felt the urge to talk to her about what was going on. An urge much like the one she'd felt the day before. Though the difference was that today, with the weirdness of their situation no longer being new to her, she was able to speak to her mother in a calm voice, one full of resignation and acceptance of their fate.

"Do you remember this place?" she asked mildly as though it were the least important thing in the world, keeping well disguised its true, earth-shaking significance.

"This place? This Rest Area...?" M had to stop and think about it.

"Yes, this Rest Area where we are now."

"I don't know... Do you remember it? Did we stop here on some other trip to California?" M was still drawing a blank.

"Yeah, something like that," C came back with feigned indifference, her real question having been answered. And then as she let the conversation drop and moved off to be alone with her thoughts, she told herself that it was really true, that M couldn't remember a thing. Not their lunchtime visits of the last two days and not even the sense of concern she'd felt over her daughter's behavior after their conversation of the previous day. She couldn't remember anything! Nothing at all. Like her mind had become a completely blank slate once again with regards to this trip and this Rest Area. Like she was truly convinced that they'd just left home that morning and this was their first stop for lunch rather than their third.

During lunch, C had to sit through the same bunch of stupid, little-kid comments from her brother that she'd sat through the last two days. The same comments though different. And she also had to sit through the same bunch of silly jokes and witless observations from her dad. The same but different. The same but worse thanks to the fact that now she was hearing those jokes for the third day in a row. And as she sat and listened to all the male stupidity coming from the two of them, she asked herself how many times she would have to hear it before she could find a way to break out of the time-loops in which they were caught. How many times would she have to hear that little brat say the same things over and over again? And how many times would she have to hear her father repeat the same stupid, stale jokes? Those jokes she'd been hearing all her life. Those jokes that, while they weren't always exactly the same each time around, they were always exactly as stupid.

C was back to her ear-phones and back to her high-volume solitude the moment they had returned to the car. And as they merged back onto the freeway and its world of weird, ever-changing scenery, she quickly immersed herself in her own little world, that of her own thoughts. A world in which she immediately banished all awareness of her family and all memory of their lunches together and instead dedicated her energies to seeking some way out of the temporal trap

in which they found themselves. But she'd only been alone with her thoughts for a short time when she suddenly found that they were being interrupted once again. Because she heard that noise once again, so loud that it cut right through the music she had blasting into her ears. So loud that it cut into her consciousness.

"I wanta stop! I wanta stop!" It was that little brat again, that little brother of hers repeating his performance of a short time earlier. And at the same time he did so, she also saw her parents repeating their own performances with M looking angrily over at G, and with G looking sheepishly out ahead as he drove the car. And it wasn't long before the car was pulling off the freeway one more time, pulling right back into the Rest Area they'd so recently left!

C asked herself what could be happening now. Could the time-loops they were stuck in be getting smaller and tighter all the time? Were the events going to start repeating themselves more and more frequently? With smaller and smaller intervals between the repetitions? And as she asked herself those questions, she also wondered if she would be able to eat again so soon after the big lunch she'd just had during the previous stop. Could she do it? But then as she considered the question, she came to realize that she actually felt hungry again. She felt as hungry as she had when they'd pulled into the Rest Area the last time around, and she even had the same urge to use the restroom. Just like their last visit had never occurred. And it wasn't long before the fact dawned on her that while her mind might be standing somewhere outside the endless series of time-loops or spirals or whatever they were, her body and her bodily functions were very much trapped inside them. They were trapped just as surely as her parents and her brother and the family car were trapped. Just as surely as everyone and everything was trapped. Everything but her awareness, that is. Everything but her own mental flow.

When they reached their chosen table this time—a table which turned out to be a repeat for once, being the same table they'd chosen during their second visit—and when C found herself alone with her mother, it didn't take long for her to confirm the fact that her mother couldn't remember a thing. Not even their most recent visit. Because she had no idea they'd ever been there before, her mind having been wiped clean just like the last time. Her mind having been wiped all the way back to a blank slate.

Soon everyone was back at the table, and C found herself being forced to sit through yet another boring meal with those obnoxious family-members of hers, with her father and her brother, and it wasn't until after the ordeal was over that she was finally able to get away from them for a little while. Or at least she was able to get away from them mentally by sitting back down in the car and sticking in her ear-phones. And as she did so, she asked herself how long it would be this time. How long would it be before they completed another time-loop? Before they pulled back into the Rest Area for still another lunch? Still another trial-by-boredom with this irritating, this dull and stupid, this... This family of hers.

It wasn't long as things turned out, because it seemed like no time at all before they were driving back down the off-ramp and into the Rest Area. And as C noticed the way her mother was looking at her father, the way she was giving him that see-what-you-did-now look, she realized that their latest time-loop had been so short that she'd actually missed the whole I-wanta-stop performance from her little brother. That the performance had already taken place.

But when? Sometime before they'd even reached the freeway? Before they'd so much as left the Rest Area the last time?

Well, the meal they ate during this latest stop was exactly the same as all the others they'd had over the last few days. Exactly the same though different. And the things people said during the meal—the stupid things, the boring things—those were exactly the same as well. The same but different. And the whole time the meal was going on, C couldn't wait for it to be over and for them to get back onto the road where she'd at least get a brief respite from this family of hers. Where she'd at least have a little while to herself and her music and her thoughts.

But the time-loops—or the warps or the spirals or whatever you'd call them—were becoming so tightly compacted by this time that C soon found her hopes for a break to be completely in vain. Because on this occasion as they drove up the on-ramp toward the freeway, they never even reached that destination before time looped back upon itself again and the on-ramp became an off-ramp. An off-ramp leading them right back to the Rest Area and back to another lunch.

C didn't know how much more of this she could take before she... Before she exploded! Before she went crazy! Before she completely lost her mind!! And what would happen then if she lost her mind? she asked herself. What would happen to her? What would happen to all of them? Would they be stuck in this weird distortion of time forever? This endless repetition of events in which nothing was ever quite repeated? This endless cycle of repetitions that weren't exactly repetitions?

C got out of the car once they had stopped in the Rest Area, and she tried to prepare herself to suffer through yet another of those insufferable lunches. And as she did so, she asked herself why these time-loops couldn't please shorten the meals a little bit. Why did they only shorten the time between meals? Why didn't they shorten the meals themselves? Because the way things were going, it wouldn't be long before her life became one long, continuous lunch. One long, continuous nightmare!

But as horrible and shocking as that thought may have been, it was nothing compared with the shock that she was to receive a few minutes later. A shock she was to receive at a sight that met her eyes during her time-to-herself, that time she spent alone before each meal while the males in the family were away playing soccer. A shock so extreme that it literally took her breath away.

Because as she stood thinking and looking about her, she saw a car pull into the Rest Area and park a short distance from where her family had parked. A car which she immediately recognized. And when a group of people got out of that car, she immediately recognized them as well. Because the car those people were getting out of was her own car! Her family's car!! And the people she saw getting out of it were her own family! All four of them! Including herself!!! She actually saw herself getting out of that car and walking over toward a picnic table! She saw C!! Right over there!! Right in front of her!!

She was completely dumbstruck as she watched them carry their things over to a table not far from where she stood, and even though one or two of them looked over in her direction as

they went, they didn't seem to notice her at all. And once the new versions of her father and brother had taken their soccer ball and gone off to kick it around on an area of lawn not far from where her "real" father and brother were doing the exact same thing, neither of the two groups seemed to be in any way aware of the other group's existence. But instead as they played nearly side-by-side, each group played as though they were the only ones out there on that lawn.

And it wasn't until the version of C from the new group had walked away from her mother to have her time-to-herself that anyone in the group ever showed the least cognizance of what was going on. Because as the new C stopped and looked around, her gaze froze the moment it came upon the old C standing there a short distance away. It froze when she saw the real C! When she saw the flesh-and-blood C standing there staring back at her. Back at this phantom C or whatever she was.

And as the two versions of herself stopped and looked back-and-forth at each other, the strangest phenomenon she'd ever felt began to take over C's field of vision. Because what she saw at that moment suddenly became a double perspective. It became a case of seeing things from two places at the same time! A case of seeing the other C standing there staring at her while simultaneously seeing herself—her real self as she'd always called it—staring back at the other C. She saw them both at the same time! She saw herself standing in two slightly different postures against two completely different backgrounds, and she saw both of those Cs at once. She saw each of them as seen from the perspective of the other C, and she saw them somehow weirdly juxtaposed the one upon the other.

She started to make a signal for the other C to meet her someplace where the two of them could talk about what was going on, but then she realized that there was no need for that as she saw the other C making the exact same signal back to her. And she saw her making that signal at the exact same time. She saw it from both perspectives. And in the same way, she continued to see all her actions being repeated, gesture for gesture and step for step, as the two versions of herself approached each other. And she watched that approach from both sides, seeing herself approaching herself from both points of view at once.

When the two Cs had gotten close enough to where they could talk, C opened her mouth and voiced the question that stood uppermost in her mind. "Do you know what's going on around here?" she asked herself—her other self. But as she did so, she saw the lips of the other C moving simultaneously with her own. She saw them forming the exact same words. And as she heard those words being spoken, they seemed to come from two places at once. They came from both her own mouth and from a point just in front of her. They came from both versions of herself.

C didn't know what to do next as both her selves stood and stared at each other in confusion. They stood and did nothing for several moments. But then she decided that what she should do was to continue the conversation with herself. Because while she knew that in speaking with her other self she would be doing nothing more than thinking out loud, she told herself that at least in that way she would be thinking. She would be doing something to try to deal with the weird, out-of-control situation in which she found herself. She would be making some small effort toward trying to regain control.

“So you’re stuck in this stuff, too?” she asked both versions of herself. “You’re stuck in these time-loops or these... And how many times have you been back to this place?” she asked her other self next, forgetting momentarily that the C in front of her couldn’t answer the question. That the other C would only ask her the exact same question, and that she would ask it at exactly the same time.

“So what’s going on with these time-loops?” she went on after a brief pause. “Are they like doubling up on each other or what? Are they starting to overlap? Are they...?” And then as she thought out loud in that way, an inspiration suddenly came to her. A way in which she might be able to break out of the loops once and for all. “Hey you know, if we were to switch places or something like that, it might get us out of this whole mess. If I left in the car you came in and you left in my car, that might...” But even as she spoke, the limitations of her plan were becoming all too apparent. Because how could she leave in the other car when the people in that group couldn’t see her and wouldn’t know she was there? How could she do that? How could she make them see her and...?

But then as she mulled the question over in her mind, another idea suddenly struck her. An idea that was even better than the last one. An idea that was absolutely brilliant! Even if she did say so herself. “What if we could combine ourselves?” she burst out in excitement. “What if we could join together into one person? If we could merge ourselves together somehow? Because that would have to break these loops, wouldn’t it? That would have to tear them apart if we could somehow join our two loops together into one.”

And as she voiced the idea to her two selves, her hand rose almost by itself, rising up and reaching out toward the self she saw standing in front of her. It was reaching out to see what would happen if she were to touch her other self. To see if sparks would fly or what. And as she reached out, the other version of herself was also reaching toward her. They were both extending their hands, both versions of C simultaneously. They were both reaching out until their fingers touched. Or at least until their fingers should have touched, because as the hands came together, C felt nothing at all. She felt her fingers touch nothing but empty space. And as she stretched her arm out a bit further, there was still nothing there. Not a thing as she watched her hand pass completely through the hand of the other C.

So what was this? Was the other C standing in front of her some type of ghost? Was she an apparition? Was she a hallucination or was she real? And if she was real, then how was C ever going to join their two selves together? How was she...? Or then again, how would she have been able to join them if the other C had turned out to be solid? Because wouldn’t that have made the whole situation that much more difficult? Wouldn’t it have made the situation even worse? So maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing after all to discover that her two selves were incorporeal to each other, was it?

And it was while she was working that problem over in her head that another brilliant idea struck her. An idea that was even more brilliant than both her earlier ones put together. An idea that was in fact a combination of those two ideas. And it wasn’t long before she was explaining her new idea to her selves out loud. “That’s what we have to do! We have to combine ourselves and switch places at the same time! Because the only way we can break these loops is by switching places, and the only way we can switch places is by passing through each other. It’s

by each of us walking right through the other and coming out on the other side! That has to be it!! That has to be the way to break out of these loops and get back to normal time.”

And with that thought in mind, it wasn't long before the two Cs began to inch forward, moving slowly and cautiously with both hands outstretched before them in case they should somehow have become solid to each other since their last non-contact. And as C moved ahead, she watched her hands pass through the hands of the other C, her hands and then her forearms. And at the same time she was watching that strange semi-disappearance of her hands and arms, she was also watching the hands of the other C pass through her own. She was seeing the phenomenon from both sides at once. And then still moving forward, she saw how the face of the other C came ever closer to her own—and how her own face came closer, too. And creeping forward, quarter-step by quarter-step, the two faces drew nearer with each passing moment, getting so close that soon she lost her ability to focus. So close that the tips of their noses met and passed one through the other. So close that finally all she could see of the other self—and all she could see of her own self—was one big blur.

And then all at once, she was on the other side. She was standing and looking out at an unobstructed view. And looking at it from a single perspective, too, from a single point-of-view for the first time since the moment when she and the other C had spotted each other. So she was back to being her normal self once again! she told herself. She was back to looking at the world from one pair of eyes rather than two-at-once! She was saved!! Or at least she hoped she was saved.

Turning to look behind her, she saw that the other C was no longer there, that she had vanished like the phantom she must have been. She saw that there was only one version of herself left in that Rest Area, that version being her. And as she turned her gaze toward the table at which her family had just been sitting down to eat lunch—her real family that is, the family with which she had come—she saw that they were no longer there either. She saw that they had vanished along with the other C!

So her strategy had worked! she told herself. She had jumped across the time-loops and switched places with the other version of herself. But then in a moment of panic at the thought of her real family's disappearance, she turned back in the direction she had originally been facing to make sure that the new version of the family was still there. To make sure that all of them hadn't vanished together and left her stranded.

And looking toward the table that family had chosen, the table at which she and her real family had eaten during their first visit to the Rest Area, she was relieved to see the three of them seated and preparing to dig into their meal. She was relieved though at the same time she was annoyed. Because she knew that now she would have to go over and sit through yet another of those awful meals. She would have to sit and listen to all the same old stupidity coming from the two obnoxious members of her family. And while she hoped that this new version of her family might prove to be a bit less obnoxious than her real family had been, she could at least take comfort in the fact that this was going to be the last time she would have to sit through that particular lunch. The knowledge that once this meal was over, she would be getting back into the car and leaving that place behind forever as they resumed their journey to California. Because

she was sure that this time around, their journey would actually take them to where they wanted to go rather than looping back upon itself. Or at least she hoped she was sure.

Any hopes she had about this new family of hers being better than the old one were quickly dashed, though, as upon approaching the table, the new version of her father called out to her, “Hey, what’s up?” And then after answering himself, “The sky!” he laughed at his own childish joke.

C cringed when she heard that same-old-dumb-joke coming from him, and she cringed when she heard the first of the same-old-stupid-little-kid-comments coming from the brat. And then with gritted teeth and steeled nerves, she prepared herself to make it through this one last repetition of that living hell known as a family picnic.

When lunch was finally over and they were back in the car and back on their way to California, C spent the first several miles watching to make sure that her strategy for breaking out of the time-loops had actually worked. She watched everything that went on outside the car’s windows, looking at the scenery and reading the road-signs they passed, making sure that everything was following the old standard patterns. Making sure that it was following the patterns associated with normal, linear time rather than those of the loops or the spirals or whatever form it was that time had previously been taking. And it was only after she had seen enough to be absolutely certain that everything was back to normal that she finally plugged her ear-phones back into her ears and turned on her music, preparing to tune everyone and everything back out of her thoughts. Preparing to return to that inner-world of hers where irritating family members couldn’t intervene upon her tranquility.

But then just as she was turning up the music, her father butted in one more time. “Hey you know, you really oughta pay attention to what’s going on around you,” he said in that lame, lessons-about-life tone of his. “Cause with those head-phones on, you never notice anything. Like the world could end, and you’d never even know it.”

“Oh dad,” C answered in her best pre-teen whine.

Whatever!!

SCHOOL SCIENCE PROJECT

If only E had been a few years older, he would have known better than to have asked his father for help with his fifth-grade science project. And he certainly would have known better than to have asked his father to help him come up with an idea for what project to do. Because E's father had ideas that fell somewhere outside the limits of normal scientific thought. Or to put it more bluntly, he was a crackpot, a complete crazy whose scientific theories ranged from the outlandish to the absurd to the totally insane. And his fondest dream had long been to shake the scientific world to its roots by proving the validity of one of his weird and implausible theories.

E saw his father's eyes light up the moment he heard the request from his son. "A science project... A science project..." he muttered to himself several times. And then after a slight pause, he launched into a long explanation of one of his many nonsensical theories and of the impossibly elaborate experiment that he hoped to perform one day in order to prove it. Something to do with reversing the polarity of the something-or-other and inverting the something-else. And he went on and on about how it could be done until suddenly he stopped himself and mumbled, "No, there's no time for that one." And then after halting just long enough to catch his breath, he moved on to another idea, another strange-sounding experiment designed to prove another of his strange theories.

This second idea proved to be just as impractical as the first one, though, as did the third and fourth ideas he came up with, not to mention the fifth and sixth. Each of them had some sort of problem that made them impossible for use in his son's science project, whether it be lack of time or lack of resources or lack of a solid and finished theory behind them. None of them were quite the experiment he was looking for. But then all at once, he blurted out, "I've got it! I've got it!!" as his eyes shone with an intensity that E had seldom seen. "We can make a mind-matter separator!"

"A what?" said E who, though he hadn't followed a thing his father had said over the last fifteen or twenty minutes, could tell by the tone of voice that this latest statement called for a reply.

"A mind-matter separator! A... Like you know how I've always told you about the connection between mind and matter, don't you?"

E didn't know whether he knew or not so his only response to his father's query was a wide-eyed stare.

"Well I know that I've told you about how mind and matter are always connected. The way that any matter you can see or feel or think about has to have mind. And the way that the two of them always go hand-in-hand. I know I've told you about that."

"Yeah, I guess..." E mumbled as his father paused momentarily.

"So what we're gonna do is we're gonna make a machine that can separate the two. A machine that can separate the mind from the matter of anything you put inside it. A machine that can split the mind off and leave behind mindless matter. And boy when the world sees that,

they're gonna... I mean we're gonna show em! You and me! We're gonna show everyone! We'll show the whole damned... er I mean the whole darned world. So, uh... Whatta you think?"

"It sounds good," E replied softly, though in truth he had no idea what his father was talking about. But he knew well enough by then to know that there was no point in arguing with him when he got all wound up like this. No, it was better to just go along.

And go along he did, watching in silence as his father went charging out to the detached garage/workshop that stood on the far side of the backyard and began dragging out the materials he planned to use for his machine. Carrying out lumber and pieces of metal and anything else he could find in that garage and tossing them into a big pile in the middle of the backyard. Getting ready to begin construction right then and there. Getting ready to seize this opportunity to prove his theory to the world.

Once there was enough material in the pile, E's father began to lay out a giant square with two-by-fours and other pieces of wood, a square so big that it took up nearly the entire yard. But then no sooner had he finished laying the foundation of his machine than he appeared to have second thoughts and, mumbling something about needing the two-by-fours in other parts of the structure, he replaced those pieces with flimsier sticks and poles and thin metal bars. And then once he had the entire base laid out to his satisfaction, he began to fasten the pieces together, some of them with staples and some with duct tape and some with nothing more than wire wrapped around them. And finally when he was all done with that, he stood back to admire his handiwork. "Well that's the base of it," he said proudly. "That's how big the pyramid is gonna be."

"The pyramid?"

"Yes, the pyramid. Of course! Because we're building a mind-matter separator, aren't we? And since pyramids are the great magnets that attract the mind-matter forces, it has to be a pyramid. No other shape would work."

"Okay..." E went along mildly.

"So what were you expecting anyway? Were you expecting me to build a round m-m separator? Or maybe a square one? Is that what you were expecting?"

"No..." E protested just as mildly as he had agreed a moment before.

"A round one indeed! How ridiculous!! How could you have thought that for an instant? A round mind-matter separator! Boy, you really take the cake." E's father paused for a response, ready to push on with the argument. But since E had no idea what to say—and no idea what he'd already said wrong—he did nothing but hang his head and shuffle his feet and wait for his father to go on. "You thought it would be round... Well you're wrong, of course! You and everyone else! You and the rest of the scientific world!! You're all wrong, and I'm gonna prove it! I'm gonna show the whole world!! Me and this machine. Me and this pyramid!!"

And with that dramatic pronouncement, E's father fell silent and his eyes began to glaze over while a dreamy look crept over his face. The look of one losing himself in delusions of

scientific grandeur. Fantasies about his imminent rise to the summit of the scientific world. And while E still had a number of doubts and a certain number of questions he wanted to ask about the project, he knew better than to bring them up right then. He knew that if he were to say anything at that moment, he would only invite more gratuitous and unwarranted attacks from his father. So instead, he told himself that it was better to say nothing for the time being. Better to wait until his father's mood changed. Or at least until his mother M got home.

E's mother arrived at the usual hour, and the first thing she did when she entered the house was to demand an explanation for all the junk scattered around the backyard.

"We're making a doesn't-matter machine," E informed her helpfully.

"A what?"

"He means a mind-matter separator. That's what we're building in the backyard," E's father corrected his son. And then apparently noticing the look of skepticism that came over his wife's face, he quickly went on. "It's for E's science project. For school... It's for him. For his school science project." And as he watched her expression begin to soften slightly, he soon threw out the magic word. "It's for his education! I'm doing this for his education."

"And how big will it be?" was her next question, said in a tone of near-consent.

"Pretty big..." E's father began vaguely. "But don't worry. You'll be able to get by it. It won't take up the entire yard."

"We'll see about that!" she came back forcefully.

And then as the conversation seemed to have arrived at an impasse, E decided that it was a good time to bring up one of his greatest concerns. "But dad... But dad..." he repeated several times before drawing his father's attention. "But dad, this thing is too big for my science display."

"This thing...? This...? You think my plan is for you to take this machine down to your school? You think it's for you to pack it under your arm and take it with you on the bus?" he began, laughing at his son's expense and mocking him in one of his ham-fisted attempts at good-natured ribbing. "No, you won't be taking this thing to school. What you'll be taking is a sample."

"A sample?"

"Yes, a sample of what it can do. You'll be taking a piece of matter with the mind removed. You'll be taking a piece of mindless matter."

"Oh, that's good..." He guessed, because in truth E had no idea what his father was talking about. But rather than ask for more details right then, he told himself that he would find out soon enough what it all meant. Or at least he hoped he would find out. He hoped this thing his father was making would work—for once. He hoped it wouldn't turn out like all those other

pieces of junk that he called his inventions. He hoped that all this work his father was doing wouldn't be for nothing.

The next day when E got home from school, he saw that his father had been busy. Very busy. He saw that he had not only framed-out the entire pyramid, having built a gigantic structure out of two-by-fours and other pieces of wood and metal, but that he had also managed to cover much of the framework with plywood and boards and tarps and sheets of plastic. He saw that he was nearly finished with the construction of his huge patch-work pyramid. And in fact it wasn't long after his father had come into the house to grab a couple of old blankets he needed to finish the job that the announcement was made.

"Well there it is," his father said proudly. "What do you think?" But his question was met with a mumbled and incoherent reply from a son both too polite and too intimidated to say what he really thought. So it wasn't long before E's father came to his own rescue. "Hey, it ain't pretty. I know that. It's not gonna win any prizes for looks. But what the heck. It's the function that counts, right? So it doesn't matter what it looks like as long as it works. Right?"

"Right, as long as it works."

"And it's gonna work! I know it will!!" E's father was evidently trying to convince himself. "Sure it'll work. It's got to. Cause the theory is all there. So of course it'll work. It's gotta work! It just... I'm sure it will!" And finally with a newly-acquired air of conviction, he launched into a rambling and disjointed explanation of the theory behind the experiment.

"You see, it's all a matter of the structures I'm gonna build inside the pyramid. It's a matter of using those structures to channel the m-m forces once they've been attracted by the pyramid. It's a matter of directing them down to where they, uh... It's a matter of syncopating their sympathetic vibrations and setting them into a harmonic pattern. It's, uh... Or is that synergizing the syncopated vibrations? Yeah, that's it. That's the secret. It's synergizing their... Or you know what? You know what the real secret is? It's in the disjuncts, that's where it is. It's in the disjuncts at the conjunctions in the structure. Cause that's what channels the energy. It's the, uh... the function of the... The function of the disjuncts at the conjunctions. It's the... Hey, write that down why don't you? That's a good one. It's a function of the conjunction at the... er I mean, the disjunction at the conjunction. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Sounds almost like poetry.

"Cause what you do is you use those disjunctions to synchronize the harmonic patterns. And you, uh... You see, it's a matter of synchronizing the harmonics of the universal disharmonies. That's what it's all about. It's harmonizing the... Hey you know what? That's another good line I came up with just now about synchronizing the harmonics. So why don't you write that one down, too? It's a matter of harmonizing the harmonics of the universe... er no, that wasn't it. It was harmonizing the... I mean synchronizing the disharmonies in the harmonicas and... No, the harmonics in the disharmonies and the... Well just write down what I said before, okay?"

And on and on he went, becoming ever less coherent as he got into the finer details of his crackpot theory. And as E stood there with distracted eyes and a wandering mind, too timid to

interrupt his father but understanding nothing of what he heard, he was only saved from the seemingly endless stream of babble when his mother arrived home from work and burst in upon the two of them.

“What’s that thing?” she asked, pointing at the huge, ugly structure that filled the backyard. “Is that your machine?”

“Yeah...” E’s father muttered sheepishly.

“Well it can’t stay there! It’s too big and it’s too... Oh, it’s horrible!”

“But it’s just for a few days,” E’s father began to plead. “It’s just until we finish the experiment. Cause I’ll tear it down as soon as we’re finished.”

“No, it can’t...” E’s mother began.

“Because remember it’s for E! It’s not for me. It’s for him. For his education!”

And with the mention of the magic word, it didn’t take long for E’s mother to relent and agree that the pyramid could stay up for a few days. Until the experiment was finished. But no longer! It had to come down the minute they were done!

So now with his mother’s final consent having been given, there remained but one family member yet to be heard from. There remained E’s high school-aged sister C. When the moment came that she ventured from her room long enough to see what was going on in the backyard, though, her only response was to groan at the sight of yet another of her father’s stupid inventions. Another of those embarrassing and... Oh god! she said to herself. I hope none of my friends see this! And with that thought in mind, she quickly retreated back to her refuge.

E awoke the next morning to the sound of shouts coming from the back porch, shouts being made in his father’s voice. And when he approached the bedroom window to see what was going on, he saw that the pyramid had been damaged during the night. He saw that the storm he’d vaguely heard pass through while he slept had reduced much of his father’s flimsy masterpiece to a tatter. That the wind had torn whole sections out of its walls and sent them flying around the neighborhood while reducing other sections of those walls to shreds. And at the same time he saw that, he also saw his father standing and shaking his fist defiantly toward the sky.

“Damn you, Darwin—or God—or whatever it is that you call yourself now-days!!” he yelled over and over again. “Damn you and your storms!! Cause you won’t stop me no matter what you throw at me! You’ll never stop me!! Cause I’m gonna finish this thing and then I’ll show you! I’ll show everyone who’s right and who’s wrong! You just watch me!!” And he shouted his defiance at Darwin—or God—loudly enough for the entire neighborhood to hear, only stopping when his wife went out and dragged him back into the house.

Much of the damage turned out to be superficial, though, so that by the time E got home from school that afternoon, it was to find that not only had his father already repaired the destructive work of the storm, but that he had also begun work on the internal structures of the

pyramid. That he had already begun creating the small compartments and tunnels and ducts that were supposed to channel the m-m forces inside the pyramid and focus them toward a single spot. Or whatever nonsense it was that his father believed he would accomplish with this experiment of his.

The first thing E wanted to do when he got home was to walk inside the structure through the doorway his father had left in one wall and see how the job was going. But as he was about to step inside, his father stopped him. Too dangerous, he said. Because the m-m forces were already becoming highly concentrated. Far too concentrated for a child to be exposed to them. A child whose mind-matter integration wasn't nearly as complete as that of an adult. So it was better for children to stay away.

E didn't like being told what to do in that way, but what other choice did he have? He didn't want to anger his father, and for all he knew, the guy might actually be right. For once. It might be dangerous for him to go inside. So instead he spent the next little while standing around watching his father work. He watched how his father would shuffle through page after page of the sketches and mathematical calculations that littered his work-bench until he found the one he was looking for, at which point he would use the information contained there to measure and cut a piece of cardboard or some other material. And then once that piece had been cut to size, his father would disappear into the pyramid with it and a roll of duct tape only to reappear a short time later and return to his unruly pile of papers to begin the process all over again. And the whole time his father was working, he kept a running monologue going, or perhaps it would be better to call it a one-man dialogue since he often seemed to be asking himself questions and then answering them.

As E stood watching, he noticed something strange about the way his father was behaving, something that had nothing to do with the fact that he was talking to himself since he always did that when he worked. No, it wasn't the fact that he was talking, but rather it had to do with the way he kept harping back on the same subject over and over again as he talked. Because usually his conversations with himself were meandering affairs that wandered from subject to subject with no clear pattern and often no logical connection. But on this day, his father kept going on and on about one single subject. He kept going on about Darwin—or God.

It wasn't long before E grew tired of watching his father work and turned to head for his room. But before he could take more than a step or two in that direction, his father called him back, evidently wanting to discuss with his son the subject he'd been discussing with himself all day long. And since on this day he'd so uncharacteristically stuck to one subject throughout the day, it turned out that the things he had to say were far more focused and coherent than they usually were. In fact, they were so coherent that if only E had been a few years older, he might actually have understood what it was that his father was talking about.

"You know how I've always talked about the connection between mind and matter, don't you? The connection we're gonna prove with this experiment of ours?" E's father began his great disquisition. "Well to me, that's always been the greatest weakness in science: its failure to account for mind. Its failure to include mind in the models that scientists make of the physical world. That's been the greatest failing all along, and it's the main thing that's prevented science from progressing any further than it has. It's the inability to see mind as anything more than the

accidental by-product of the evolution of the brain. It's the failure to see mind as one of the basic poles or basic pillars of existence, right along with space and time. That's been the Achilles Heel of modern science and especially so in the science of evolution.

"And to make matters worse, the only serious attempt that's been made to incorporate mind into the scheme of things has come from a pseudo-science known as Intelligent Design. It's come from a bunch of true-believing monotheists who are incapable of conceiving any type of mind that doesn't conform to their religious beliefs. So the only alternative they offer to pure, dumb, Darwinian chance is a guy-in-the-sky designer who is completely separate from the world he designs and acts upon. They offer a mind-out-there and a mindless world in here. So they're just as far off the mark as the Darwinists are, as far or perhaps farther since they add a completely uncalled-for and unproven designer on top of both groups' total ignorance about the true nature of the physical world.

"And when it comes to proof, the only thing the design-advocates have to offer is the huge complexity of the physical world as they complain that it's far too complicated to have evolved on its own. And while they may have a certain point there, it makes you wonder how they can take an idea like that and then twist it to make it fit their preconceived notion that there can only be a single designer at work. One and only one. Because when you look at how hyper-complex the physical world is, the only reasonable conclusion that an objective observer could reach is that, while it could possibly have been designed by a committee, there's no way it was done by a single entity. That if it was designed at all, it was designed by many competing intelligences and many designers, each with its own agenda and its own set of priorities. Because that makes a lot more sense for a super-complex world like ours than a single designer, doesn't it?" He paused for a moment to give his audience a chance to voice its agreement, but the only reply E gave to his father was the faraway look of a ten-year-old who understood nothing that was being said to him and whose mind was beginning to wander.

"Like take a look at a tax law, for example. The way that when it's first presented by a single designer, it's simple and straight-forward and easy to understand. But then when you see it later, after the committees have gotten finished with it, what you have is a huge mess. You have a law where everyone on the committee has added their two-cents worth and where they've taken a simple proposal and turned it into something so complicated that not even professional tax attorneys can understand it. They've turned it into something every bit as complex as the world in which we live.

"And do you know what's an even bigger weakness in the Intelligent Design argument? It's their contention that the collision that occurred between the earth and an asteroid, the collision that created the moon and also set the earth on its current orbit with its current spin, had to be a planned event. And they don't say it was planned because of any sort of proof. No, the only reason they say so is because if that collision was a random event, then there can't be any grand-unified planning going on. There can't be a single, monotheistic planner behind it all. Or perhaps there can't be any planning at all. Perhaps there can be nothing more than opportunism. But what event could possibly be more random than a collision between two bodies in space? And the only argument offered against randomness is the fact that the probability of the two bodies striking at precisely the right angle to turn the earth into a habitable planet is extremely tiny. Billions-to-one or something like that. But then you have to ask: what other specific angle

had a greater probability than the one that occurred? What other angle would have been more likely? And the answer is that none of them were more probable. That any and all specific angles were just as unlikely, so that no matter what the final angle of the collision turned out to be, the odds against it would have been the exact same billions-to-one.”

E’s father paused here once again, getting ready to begin his summary of the subject at hand. The subject of mind and matter and evolution and all the rest. When he looked into the eyes of his listener, though, it had to be clear to him that he wasn’t being followed at all. That he was completely on his own. “So you see, the problem is that evolution is as much a mental phenomenon as it is a physical one. It’s one that takes place in mind every bit as much as it does in space and time. It’s not simply a process of growing, but it’s also one of learning. And unfortunately, there’s no one around who can see that. So instead of a realistic view of evolution and the world as a whole, all we get are two very narrow and limited views. We get either the mind-as-by-product of the Darwinists or the mind-out-there of the Creationists and the Intelligent Designers. We never get a wider view more in conformity with the reality of existence. A view that sees mind as acting upon the world but acting in the way that mind really acts. A view that sees mind as acting from within. Acting in partnership with the physical world. So for that reason, we never get a view that’s capable of including both the true hyper-complexity of the world and evolution and its true ultra-simplicity.”

And with that rather pompous pronouncement, E’s father was finished with his presentation, one that unfortunately had gone right past its under-aged audience. Gone by without leaving the least impression just like it would do with E’s mother later on that afternoon when his father repeated his performance for her. Because after all the strange and nonsensical ideas she’d heard come out of his mouth over the years, she had long since developed the ability to tune him out. To let him ramble on while paying not the least attention to what he had to say. And to all appearances, that was precisely what she did on this day when he began to propound. She heard him talking to her, but she didn’t hear a word he said. And she didn’t care.

By the next day, E’s father had gone back to being his same old rambling, nonsensical self. But in spite of that, his work-pattern remained exactly where it had been over the last few days, stuck somewhere on the extreme manic side of his personality. Because by the time E got home from school that day, it was to find that his father had everything finished and ready to go. That there was nothing left to do but to complete the circuits and perform the experiment. The experiment that was sure to shake the scientific establishment to its roots. The experiment that would prove his father right and prove everyone else wrong. The experiment that would begin his father’s ascent to the very pinnacle of the scientific world. To somewhere far above Einstein and the other also-rans.

The two of them began the final phase of the experiment by documenting everything they had done so far, taking pictures of the pyramid and gathering up the jumbled papers full of sketches and calculations. And next they started to look around for a likely test-subject, some object whose mind they could separate from its matter. They looked for a rock they could place inside the machine while they turned it on. But it couldn’t be just any rock as far as E’s father was concerned. No, it had to be the perfect one, a rock big enough to push a pyramid of that size to the limits of its power and also one that was flat enough to where it wouldn’t roll away once its mind was gone. Because without mind, it would be impossible to find that rock again should

it ever become lost since a rock with no mind can't be seen or felt. So if by chance their rock were to roll away on them, it would be lost forever.

They eventually found a rock that fit all their criteria, a big chunk of concrete actually. And so after taking a few more photos, E's father set it down on a small piece of plywood and then set the whole thing in the center of the pyramid. He set it in the spot where the m-m forces were to be concentrated. But as he prepared to close the door he'd left in one side of the structure and at the same time, in a clever bit of engineering on his part, to open the last of the circuits and set the machine in motion, he paused to answer a last-minute question being directed his way by his young collaborator.

"What's the wood for?" E wanted to know.

"It's so we can pick the rock back up afterwards, cause once its mind is gone, you can't touch it ever again. You can only pick up the piece of wood it's sitting on."

"Oh, okay..." E accepted the explanation hesitantly. "But won't anything happen to the wood?"

"No, I have everything focused just above where the wood is sitting. I have it focused on the spot where the rock is. So the wood will still be there with its mind, just like it is now... I hope." And then with that objection having been disposed of, it came time for E's father to close the door and open the circuits. It came time for him to begin his shake-up of the scientific world.

"So how long will it be?" E interrupted his father's efforts once again. "How long will it take?"

"How long..." E's father hesitated as though he hadn't thought about that one yet. As though he'd only thought about how to aim the m-m forces but not about how long it would take for them to do their work. And soon he was mumbling to himself: Would the effect be instantaneous? Or would it take five minutes of concentrated m-m forces? Ten minutes? He seemed to have no idea. And as he mumbled on, he began to make reference to the rock itself, to the fact that while a rock has very little mental energy, what energy it has is quite stubborn and intransigent. To the fact that a rock's mental energy is the sort that never acts on its own but rather has to be acted upon. So how long would it take to separate a mind like that from its matter? he mumbled to himself several times.

"An hour," he finally told his son, evidently picking a number out of the air and hoping he was right. Hoping that he hadn't under-estimated the time needed so that when they opened the machine, they would find a rock with a half-mind. And since over-estimating the time shouldn't cause any problems, not like under-estimating it might, it seemed that he'd decided to play it safe and give the machine plenty of time to finish the job.

E watched as his father closed the door and set the machine in motion so to speak, and as he saw the latches being thrown into place, he felt a wave of excitement come surging through him, an excitement like he hadn't felt before that moment. Because up until then, all he'd done was watch his father work and listen to him babble. But now, something was actually going to happen. Something cool he hoped. Maybe even something magical. Now he was going to see the

m-m forces do their stuff, whatever that might be. As he stood and watched while the seconds and minutes went ticking by, though, he saw nothing. Absolutely nothing. And soon he was starting to ask himself questions: Where are the mysterious lights? And where are the strange sounds? And what about the spooky music you always hear in the movies? Because there was none of that. Nothing to see and nothing to hear. Nothing but the peace and calm of a quiet weekday afternoon.

So that's it? he wanted to ask. That's all there is to it? But when he saw the look of fading hope that covered his father's face, he decided that it was best not to say anything out loud. And it wasn't long before his own level of excitement and expectation had fallen so low that he went drifting off to his room to play. He went off and left his father alone with that machine of his. That machine and what looked to be his pending disillusionment.

E returned to the yard at the end of an hour when he heard his name being called. He returned in time for the great unveiling, that moment when the pyramid would be opened and the results of the experiment revealed. And he noticed the way his father's hands trembled as he approached the structure. "Well, here goes nothing," his father said in an unsteady voice as he threw the door open and peered inside. And then he stood flat-footed in that open doorway gazing intently into the interior of the machine. He stood and looked and said nothing for the longest time. He said nothing, and he did nothing. He just stood there frozen in place like he was in a state of shock. And it was only when E bumped him slightly while trying to get a look inside for himself that his father finally snapped back to life.

"I did it!" he shouted all at once, yelling so loudly that he sent his son jumping back in fear. "I did it! I did it!" And then grasping E by the shoulder, he dragged him over and pointed inside the pyramid. Pointed for him to look. But as E followed his father's finger, he saw nothing. No rock and nothing else. Nothing but the plywood board sitting there empty. "I did it! I showed them!" his father continued to shout as he grabbed his son's hands and danced about. "I proved it! I showed the whole goddamned world!! Er I mean the whole gosh-darned world."

And it wasn't until after his father's one-man celebration had gone on for several minutes, until his wild euphoria had begun to cool into a quiet, ecstatic glow, that E was finally able to bring up the question he had on his mind. "So where is it?" he asked in all innocence.

"It's right there of course. It's right where we left it. You just can't see it anymore, that's all," came the reply. And as E responded to that statement with a quizzical look, his father expanded upon his explanation. "It's still there, but now it has no mind, so you can't think about it. Cause if you could see it, then you'd be thinking about it, right? So of course you can't see it."

"Okay..." E went along for now, feeling less than convinced.

"Yeah, you can't see it and you can't feel it, cause if you could do either of those things, then you'd be thinking about it. And when we go to pick up that board it's sitting on, we won't be able to feel its weight, either. Cause feeling the weight of it would be thinking about it, wouldn't it?"

"But dad..."

“So being that you can’t think about it, it just goes to reason that you can’t sense any of its qualities,” his father pressed on in spite of the attempted interruption. “It can’t have any qualities you can think about or else you’d be thinking about the rock when you thought about them.”

“But dad...”

“Like if you thought about its weight, you’d be... You’d, uh... What was it you wanted?” E’s father finally broke off and acknowledged his son.

“But I’m thinking about it right now,” E noted with a child’s directness and simplicity.

“No you’re not!” his father shot back quickly.

“Yes I am.”

“No you’re not! No you’re not!” he went on with infantile persistence.

“Dad!” E shouted in an attempt to interrupt the flow of the argument before it could degenerate any further. Because while he had outgrown that sort of yes-I-can-no-you-can’t argument some years back, it was clear that his father had yet to do the same.

“What I mean is that you’re thinking about what the rock used to be back when it still had mind. You’re not thinking about what the rock is now.”

“Yes I am. I’m thinking about...” E began, still far from convinced.

But his father cut him off. “No you’re not! You can’t think about it now because it can’t be done. It’s impossible! It’s completely impossible!!” And he made the statement with such force and such fatherly authority as to declare the discussion on that point to be over. Once and for all.

His father said it in such a way that E dared not object any further, and it wasn’t until his father had entered the pyramid and picked up the piece of plywood upon which the rock supposedly sat and begun carrying it into the house that his courage finally returned. Because it was only while his father was walking along with the nearly weightless plywood in hand, balancing it carefully so as not to let the rock slide off, that E felt brave enough to give voice to another of his doubts. “How do you know it’s still on the wood?”

“Huh?”

“How do you know you’re picking up the rock when you pick up that wood? Cause didn’t you say you can’t pick it up?” E went on with undeniable logic.

“Well, it’s just... It has to still be there, cause where else could it go?” his father responded, and soon he seemed to launch into an effort to erase the doubts that had suddenly arisen in his own mind. To convince himself that the rock was still there. “It has to be there! The wood has to be picking it up. Cause it held the thing before, right? So it has to hold it now. It just

has to! Cause if it didn't, then we'd be... No, it has to be sitting there on this board just like it was before. It just... It has to, that's all. It's there because it has to be!!"

E's mother returned home a short time later, and when she did, she met her husband's wildly enthusiastic description of the experiment's success with her usual indifference. And the only thing that seemed to make an impression upon her was his statement that the pyramid had now served its purpose. "So that means you'll be taking that thing down, right?" was her immediate.

"Yeah, real soon..." E's father began.

"Tomorrow!!" E's mother insisted in the voice of she-who-shall-be-obeyed.

"Right, tomorrow... It'll be done."

And so on the next day, once the demolition had been accomplished, much to the relief of E's mother—not to mention the relief of his sister—the science project entered into a whole new and different phase. It entered into the phase during which E and his father would prepare to present their findings to the world. Or at least to present them to E's fifth-grade class. It entered into the phase during which E would gather up the materials to be included on his display board.

E and his father picked out a few pictures of the pyramid along with before-and-after pictures of the rock, and his father also insisted upon the inclusion of a few key pages of his mathematical scribbles along with the notes that E had written down about the theoretical underpinnings of his father's scientific triumph. But when E answered this last request by saying that he hadn't taken any notes, it was then that the next phase truly began. The phase during which his father spent days feeding E one silly, disjointed idea after another, dictating one high-sounding but nonsensical statement after another and telling E to write it all down. Telling him to write down everything he had to say. Everything.

It wasn't until the date of the science fair drew near that E's mother finally found the time in her busy schedule to take a hand in the project herself. And when she did so, she immediately tossed out all the garbage and the nonsense that the two males had written about it. She tossed one page after another of incoherent ramblings about weird and incomprehensible and often self-contradictory ideas. The ideas that passed for her husband's theoretical exposition. And in the end, she left little intact besides a few statements of fact: We did this and we did that, and this is what happened. That and the pictures and the pages of mathematical scribbles which she didn't understand at all but which looked reasonably scientific and factual to her.

After that, E and his mother set out to organize and arrange their much-reduced pile of papers on the display board. But no sooner had they finished doing so and then stepped back to see what they had than their gazes turned from the board to each other, and immediately they seemed to read it each in the eyes of the other: This is a disaster! This pathetic little display board and that empty piece of plywood which together comprise the entire project. This is terrible. But they both knew that by then, it was way too late to turn back and do a different project. So E was stuck with it. And he could almost feel the wave of sympathy that flowed out to him from his mother. The sympathy she clearly felt at the thought of all the ridicule and

humiliation he was sure to suffer when the other kids saw that sorry excuse for a science project. That idiotic project he had done with his father.

And ridicule he suffered indeed, poor E. So much so that when he got home from school on the day of his presentation, he ran straight to his room and threw himself onto his bed where he let loose with the tears he'd been holding inside all day. The tears he had refused to allow the other kids to see. Because it had been so horrible what he'd been through that day! The way all the kids had laughed at him when he'd tried to explain his experiment, tried to explain some of the crazy ideas and theories that were not only beyond his comprehension but also beyond his vocabulary. And the way that some of the kids had made a game of the whole thing afterward, the way they'd gone over and pretended to pick up the invisible rock and throw it at each other and performed similar stunts. And then there was the way his teacher had reacted, too. The way she had looked at him and his empty piece of plywood with a look of such utter scepticism. The way she had asked him if he was joking or what. And the way that, only after he'd told her that the whole thing had been his father's idea—that father whose babbling nonsense the teacher surely remembered from their parent-teacher conference—she had finally turned and walked away shaking her head. Because it wasn't the child's fault after all.

But E's father seemed completely unaware of what was going on with his son when he got home. He seemed to notice none of the signs that something tragic had happened at school that day, being so wrapped up in himself as he was and so excited about his own scientific success that nothing in his son's behavior made the least impression upon him. And while he stood over E who lay on the bed sobbing uncontrollably, the significance of that posture and that action apparently failed to register with him.

"So what did they say? What did the teacher say? Did the experiment shock her or what? Did it leave her speechless? Or did she yell something when she saw it? What happened?!" E's father went on with question after question, not pausing for a reply since he was far too excited to stop and listen to what anyone else had to say. He was too excited to do anything but talk. "I bet she was shocked, wasn't she? I bet she couldn't believe that I actually did it. She couldn't believe that I actually found a way to separate mind from matter. I know she couldn't!"

And on and on he went, blabbing away as though completely deaf to the whimpers and moans and gasps and groans that were his son's only replies. He went on making one self-congratulatory statement after another. And it was only after long minutes of that, as he apparently grew tired of patting himself upon the back, that he finally paused long enough to let his son respond. When he asked E for comment, though, the thing he asked about had nothing to do with the boy's obvious distress. No, what he wanted his son to do was to confirm his own imagined triumph at the science fair.

"She... She..." E forced the words out the best he could, forced them out between heaving sobs. And trying hard to put on a brave face as he spoke, he gave his father the best piece of news he could think of from that awful day. "She... gave me... a C."

THE TWO OF ME

Is that when it starts? When I'm getting on the bus? Like with the way the driver nods at me like he knows me or something, and the way that other guy looks at me, too. That guy and the one next to him. Because how can any of them know me when I never take this bus? I never take any bus. I always take my car when I go to the union hall. But it's just today that I'm doing something different. Today that I'm taking the bus. So how can any of those guys know me?

They can't of course, so I don't think much about it at the time. I don't worry about how they act since they're obviously confusing me with someone else. And it's not until after I get off the bus in downtown Seattle and I'm walking the last few blocks to the hall that things really start to turn weird. Because there I am walking along minding my own business when some desk-jockey-type I've never seen before comes up and starts talking to me like he thinks he knows me.

Tony was on his way to a favorite coffee stand not far from the office where he worked when he saw a familiar face coming his direction along the sidewalk. He saw someone he'd met before, though he couldn't say where it had been exactly or when. And since he couldn't even remember the guy's name, he immediately began to feel uncomfortable about the impending reunion. Because how would he address this person when they met? What would he call him besides hey you?

So Tony decided to avoid the meeting if possible, and he began to ease over toward the edge of the sidewalk furthest from this acquaintance of his while at the same time doing his best to avert his eyes as they approached. He pretended that he hadn't noticed this... this... this guy whatever his name was. But then just as they were arriving at a critical distance, Tony made the mistake of trying to steal a glance to see whether or not the guy had noticed him. He made the mistake of looking over only to find himself caught making eye-to-eye contact. And so with his cover blown, he knew that he had no choice but to stop and say hello to...

"Hi there... Larry," the name came to him just in time. "How are you?"

Larry, that's what this guy calls me. This guy who's been looking at me in strange, furtive ways. He stops and he calls me Larry. And me, I don't know what to do about it. I don't know who he thinks I am. So the only thing I can do is tell him the truth. Tell him that my name isn't Larry. It's G.

"Your name isn't Larry, it's Larry? What are you...?" Tony wasn't sure what sort of joke Larry was making, but he tried to go along with it just the same. "Right, so how have you been, Larry-not-Larry?"

No, my name is G, I tell the guy a second time when he acts like he doesn't understand me the first time. And then I tell him a third time, too, but each time I say it, he answers me like I just told him that my name is Larry, not G. And I ask myself, What type of weird game is this guy playing, anyway?

Larry kept insisting that his name was Larry, though. He kept insisting that it wasn't Larry, it was Larry. And it wasn't long before that inexplicable insistence of his left Tony at a complete loss for words. It left him standing there silent and awkward, unable to figure out what Larry's game could possibly be.

Then finally the guy shuts up for a minute, so I take the opportunity to get the hell out of there. Because I've had more than enough of him and his little game, and I'm ready to get back on my way to the union hall. So I just say goodbye to him abruptly, and then I turn my back and walk away.

And when Larry suddenly said goodbye and walked off, Tony had nothing to say in return. In fact, it was only after he'd taken a moment or two to regain his bearings that he was able to resume his stroll toward the coffee stand. Able to start walking again, shaking his head as he went along and asking himself what that exchange had been all about. What had Larry been saying and why had he been saying it? And what had he been smoking anyway?

As I'm walking away, though, I'm totally confused about the whole incident, and I keep asking myself, What was that guy talking about? What was his game? And what the hell has he been smoking? Because it was all so strange. So very strange. But then I've only gone about another block or so when I notice that some other guy I've never seen before is looking me over like he recognizes me or something. And the next thing I know, he's calling out to me, "Hey Dennis! How are you?"

Dennis?! Oh shit, here we go again! I say to myself. But by now I know better than to stop and let this guy play his games with me. Stop and let him draw me back into that Larry bullshit again—or into that Dennis bullshit or whatever it's gonna be this time around. I know enough to wave him off and keep on going. But as I continue on my way down the street, I have even more questions for myself now than I did before. Because while the game that first guy played was already strange enough, it seems almost inconceivable to me that a second person would attempt to play the exact same game on me. A second person in the space of a block or two with the only difference being that the second guy tried to pull the stunt using a different name. And as I walk along, I'm asking myself, What are the chances of that, anyway? What are the odds against something like that happening twice? They have to be astronomical! They have to be like... impossible!! The whole thing has to be virtually impossible.

But as strange as those two encounters on the street have been, they're nothing compared to what awaits me when I enter the union hall. Because whatever games those two guys were playing, I find that the people in the hall are playing the exact same thing. And they're playing it in spades. They're... I mean, these people aren't strangers to me. They're seamen. They're union brothers. They're people I've known for a long time. So how is it that they act like none of them can see who I am? How is it that they act like I'm not me? Like I'm not G?

Mike was the first one in the union hall to see Steve walk in. Steve his old friend who hadn't been around in quite some time. So upon seeing him, Mike walked over to shake his hand and ask him how he'd been.

The first one to talk to me when I get inside is Mike, a guy I've known for years, a guy who I've relieved or who has relieved me on any number of night-jobs, not to mention the fact that we shipped together a few years back. And on top of that, I've been seeing him almost every day lately since both of us have been coming to the hall a lot. But when he sees me, Mike acts like he hasn't seen me in years, and he comes right up and shakes my hand. And then the next thing I know, he's calling me Steve. Steve! He's asking me, "How are you, Steve?"

And me? I just tell him, "Hey man, you know who I am! You know my name is G."

But the strangest thing happened when Mike asked Steve how he'd been, because Steve's response was to say, "Hey man, you know who I am! You know my name is Steve."

And Mike could only say, "Yeah Steve, of course," as he asked himself what had happened. Had he accidentally said some other name? Had he inadvertently called Steve by some name other than Steve? He didn't know what type of slip he must have made to bring on a response like that. But he quickly brushed it aside and went on with the conversation. "So are you still living in Port Orchard?" he asked.

Next thing I know, though, he's asking me about Port Orchard. And all I can say back is that I've never lived there and he knows it. He knows that I live in Puyallup.

Mike was startled by Steve's response once again, though, as Steve insisted that he'd never lived in Port Orchard. Instead he said that he lived in Port Orchard. He said that he'd never lived there, but he lived there! And Mike didn't know what to say next after a statement like that. He was completely confused as he stood in silence for some seconds until a couple of other guys came over and joined the conversation. Until they came over and greeted Steve and asked him how he'd been.

And as if it's not bad enough that Mike is calling me Steve, the next thing I know, here come Derek and Dave who start doing the exact same thing. They come over and they call me Steve! All of them!! And it's at this moment that I finally have to admit it to myself, admit that it's time to stop fooling around and stop denying that something strange is happening around here. Something truly strange. I have to admit that all these people mistaking me for someone else can't possibly be a coincidence. Not at this point. Not with all these guys in the hall mistaking me for Steve. These guys who know me and know Steve—and who know that we look nothing alike! So there has to be something else going on, though I have no idea what that something can be.

Because it could have been a coincidence early on, couldn't it? What with two guys on the street mistaking me for someone else. Or actually mistaking me for two different someones: for Larry and for Dennis. But there's nothing coincidental about these guys in the union hall mistaking me for Steve. No, it's gone way past that by now. And as I think about it, the first thing that pops into my head is the idea that this could be part of a conspiracy. That maybe all these guys are in on it together. Maybe for some strange reason, they're all playing a trick on me. The guys in the union hall, the two guys on the street, maybe even the people on the bus who nodded at me. All of them! But no sooner do I come up with that idea than I'm putting it aside, because whatever else is wrong with me, I'm not clinically paranoid. And the conspiracy that I

see looming before my eyes is one of such huge proportions that I really can't take it seriously. So I tell myself that there has to be something else at work here. Something besides coincidence and something besides a conspiracy. There has to be some other explanation. But what? What can it be? I keep asking myself that question over and over again.

Steve's behavior was very strange at first, like he was totally overwhelmed by something, some thought or some problem. And while he'd at least stopped repeating the weird statements he'd made to Mike at the beginning of the conversation, he wasn't saying much of anything else that made sense, either. And in fact, he was hardly saying anything at all. He was doing little more than grunting or mumbling incoherently as he stood there with a strange, vacant look on his face like he was lost in his thoughts. With a look in his eyes of one whose mind is in some other world.

But then while I'm standing there thinking about what's going on, there comes a moment when something seems to give way inside me. A moment when all of a sudden, I somehow... A moment when I change all at once.

And it was only after a prolonged near-silence that Steve suddenly seemed to snap out of it. That he suddenly joined in on the conversation, acting like the same old Steve he'd always been. And he began to talk and answer questions just like he always had.

Because it's like all at once, I really *am* Steve. I mean I'm G, too, but in a way I'm also Steve. And I know things about Steve without actually knowing them, if that statement makes any sense to you. I know all the things he knows, and I remember the things he remembers, but I only do so in a certain way. I remember them without actually remembering them. Like I can use those memories of his when I speak, but at the same time I can't call them up and truly remember them. So in a strange way, I'm Steve. And as I'm talking with Mike and the others, I'm doing it exactly the way Steve always has. And for that reason, I can see that none of the guys in the union hall ever suspect who I really am. Down inside. They never know that they're actually talking with G.

Then after the conversation has gone on for some time, it suddenly dawns on me that I ought to try something out. So all at once, I ask them, "Has G been around lately?"

"Yeah, he was in here yesterday," Dave answers me, "but I haven't seen him today."

"Oh, okay," is my only reply because he's already answered my real question for me. He's told me that he can hear me when I say the name G. That it's not like before when people heard other names. So I know that I can talk about G as long as I refer to him in the third person. Him or whatever I should be calling G. Because while I know that he still exists—Dave's response has proven that—I'm no longer sure that I'm still him.

After awhile, I go outside for a smoke-break. Steve is a smoker, you see, so I've got to provide him with his nicotine fix. And after that, I return to the hall a few minutes before job-call. I return and quietly take a seat to await the non-event. Because on this day, there are no jobs going out, and that in spite of the trip I've made all the way to Seattle. So all there is for me to do now is to sit back and wait for the dispatcher to give out the bad news before heading for home.

But then after job-call, as I get up to leave, I nod to a couple of the guys I was talking with earlier only to be met with blank stares. The sort of stares that Seattle seamen give to east-coasters who come into their hall trying to steal their jobs. And when I see that unmistakable look coming from those guys, I all at once realize that I'm no longer Steve. I realize that the memories-of-another that I'm calling up now are those of some guy from Boston. I realize that Steve's memories are long gone and that somehow over the last few minutes, I've turned into someone else. I've turned into an east-coast invader, someone to be shunned by all self-respecting northwest seamen.

So I leave the hall and walk to the nearest bus-stop, and it's not until after I'm there that a potentially crucial thought ever occurs to me. That I stop and ask myself, Hey, whatever became of Steve anyway? Was he in the union hall with me after the smoke-break? Or did he disappear while I was outside? What the hell happened to him? Where did he go?

And I ask those questions with a rising awareness that Steve's fate could hold the key to my entire situation. That it could be the one piece of evidence that explains exactly what's happening to me, whether my body is morphing from one person's into another's or whether my consciousness is jumping from body to body or what. And I only wish that I'd been a little sharper and thought about it earlier, back when I was still at the hall where I could have checked to see where Steve had gone. But by now it's way too late, and I know it. By now the best I can hope for is to maybe answer the question someday in the future. Someday when I run into Steve again and ask him if he remembers anything about that visit of his to the union hall. But even as I'm thinking about that possibility, I'm already coming up with the answer myself. I'm telling myself that Steve will have to remember it if all those other guys remember, won't he? He'll have to remember the visit whether he was actually there or not. So in other words, it's hopeless. The time for answers has already passed me by, and now I'm condemned to eternal ignorance.

Well, I take the first bus going my way—one going toward Puyallup, not Port Orchard—and as I climb aboard, the driver greets me. "Hello, Mr. S," he says with a smile, but I just grunt in reply before heading for the back of the bus. Heading for a place where I won't have to talk to him. Because I've already had more than enough of holding other people's conversations for them and what I really want is to spend some time alone. Some time with G and no one but G. Some time to think about the strange things that have been happening to me today and to try to work the whole thing out. The whole jumbled mess that my life has somehow become.

Eventually we arrive at the stop where I get off and transfer to a local bus. And as I'm leaving, the driver acts like he doesn't know me from Adam. He doesn't say, Goodbye, Mr. S, or anything like that. No, he just gives me a generic have-a-nice-day nod. And when I see that, I start kicking myself once again for not having paid attention earlier. For not having noticed if he said, Goodbye, Mr. S, to someone else getting off the bus. To the real Mr. S whoever he might be.

Soon I'm on the local bus, and for once I get a break as no one seems to recognize me. No one greets me or even looks at me with anything more than the passing glances that people give to strangers. And in that way, I make it all the way to my bus-stop and all the way home without further incident. I make it home where I can hardly wait to go inside and get away from all the strangeness I've been experiencing this day. Inside where I can be myself once again.

Myself and no one else. Inside where I can be one person rather than two—or one-and-a-half or whatever it is that I've been all day long. Inside where I can be nothing more than plain, ordinary old G.

When I reach the front door and pull out the key, though, it refuses to enter the lock no matter how hard I try. And with a rising sense of terror growing in my guts, I'm struck by the sudden realization that my escape from the weirdness of this day isn't going to be nearly as quick and easy as I've been hoping. The realization that this thing still has a long way to run. And I'm doing my best to keep calm as I start asking myself questions: What now? What should I do? Should I try ringing the bell just in case, even though I know that there won't be anyone home at this hour—no one but G that is? Soon I get back to the key-ring and try using every key I have. I try them all with the same lack of success. And my next step is to walk around to the backdoor where even if my keys won't work, I can still use the hidden key. As expected, none of the keys enter the lock on the backdoor any more than they entered the one in front. But then in an unexpected twist, it turns out that when I go looking for the hidden key, it's nowhere to be found. It's not where we always keep it, and it's nowhere else I can think to look. It's gone!

So I'm locked out!! I say to myself with the terror rising again and creeping upwards, creeping toward my throat. I'm lost!! I can't even get into my own house! Or that is, if it's still my house. If I'm still G and this is where I live. And as I hold up the keys and look at them, they look exactly the same as they always have. They look like the same ones I used to lock that front door a few hours ago. So why won't they work anymore? I ask. Why won't they unlock the doors or even enter the locks? What the hell is going on around here?!

I know that it's not good to spend all my time thinking about questions like those, so it's not long before I change the subject on myself. Before I start asking myself practical questions: What should I do next? Should I wait here in the yard until my wife gets home and lets me in? No, it's a little too cold for that today. So how about going for a drive? How about taking the car and going somewhere warm to wait out the rest of the afternoon? Yes, that's the thing to do!

But no sooner do I reach the little car that I usually drive to the union hall, not to mention using it for trips around town, than I find exactly what I should have been anticipating. I find that my keys won't work in the doors of the car any more than they worked in the doors of the house. I find that I'm completely locked out, not only of my house but also of my car. That I'm stuck here alone and on foot. And feeling the terror rising within me yet again, I quickly turn my thoughts back toward something practical, toward coming up with a good place to go right now. Someplace within walking distance where I can get in out of the cold while I await my wife's arrival. Her arrival and my deliverance. And it's not long before I think about the little branch library in the local commercial district a few block away, back where I just got off the bus a short time ago. I think about that library, and soon I'm on my way there.

And then as I'm walking along, the thought comes to me that maybe I should check my wallet. Maybe I should look at my driver's license and see what it says. Because my keys still look the same as always, don't they? Even though they no longer work in the locks where they've always worked. And at the same time, my hands and my reflection in windows and other places still look the same to me. So what about the driver's license? I ask myself. Whose name is

on that? Is it my name or is it someone else's? And is there any way I can read the thing to see who I am now? Who I am and where I live?

And I'm just in the process of pulling out the license when some guy comes up and starts talking to me. Some guy I don't know though one I might have seen around the neighborhood. But whoever he is, he seems to know the person I supposedly am at the moment.

"Hello Ken," Andy said to his friend as he approached the library that Andy himself had just exited. "How have you been?" he went on as Ken glanced up from the object he was fumbling with in his hands.

"Oh fine," I say back to the guy when he asks me how I am. Because by now I know how to play the game. I know that if I tell him who I really am, all he'll hear is me saying that I'm... Ken or whatever name it is that he called me. So instead of trying to correct him, I just go along.

Ken answered that he was fine, though he sounded a bit distant when he spoke. And he went on to answer the next few questions just as vaguely.

I go along with the situation, and I say whatever. I say the first thing that pops into Ken's head, and I really don't care what it is. I don't care if it makes any sense or not.

Then as Ken began to warm up to the conversation, still there was something odd about the way he spoke. The way his statements came out so disjointedly. The way they jumped from one thing to another.

And the truth is that it's kind of liberating to be able to do that. To be able to speak without having to worry about what anyone else might think. Because I don't care what this guy thinks about Ken. I'm not him, or at least I'm not gonna be him for much longer. So who cares what type of impression I'm leaving? It's Ken's problem, not mine. I can say anything I damn well please and it won't mean a thing. And that's pretty much what I end up doing over the next few minutes. I say any old thing I want to. But then just as I'm about to come out with something totally off-the-wall, I suddenly have second thoughts. I tell myself that it might be a bad idea to say anything too strange right now since there's still a chance that this guy can do something to help me deal with this predicament of mine. Whatever it may be. So maybe I shouldn't alienate him all the way.

And it was just when Ken seemed to be on the verge of going completely off the deep end that he suddenly calmed down and clammed up. He stopped talking all at once, and his attention returned to the object he held in his hand.

Because what if I ask this guy to read my driver's license for me? What will he see there? Will he see Ken's name or will he see mine? And will the name he sees hold some sort of key to my condition? It just might. You never can tell.

The next thing Andy knew, Ken was holding out his driver's license and asking him to take a look at it, saying something to the effect that he thought there was a printing error on it. But he said that he couldn't check it himself since he didn't have his reading-glasses with him.

“But you don’t use glasses, do you?” Andy asked him.

“Well no, but I guess I need em,” Ken shot back quickly. And then he repeated his request for Andy to read the information on the license out loud. Name and address.

“4139 East 19th Street,” is the address the guy reads to me, a place that’s off in a different direction from where my real house is located—G’s house that is—though it’s still well within walking distance from the library. So I thank him for the information, and I cut off the conversation as quickly as I can. I say, Goodbye, I’ll see you later, and I then head for Ken’s house while the address is still fresh in my mind.

And no sooner had Andy done as requested and handed the license back than he heard an abrupt thank-you-and-goodbye from his friend. And the next thing he knew, Ken was walking away from him. He was walking away but not toward the library like he had been before. Instead, he was walking toward home. And as he watched Ken leave, all Andy could do was shake his head and ask himself what had gotten into his friend today. Why had he been acting so strangely? So borderline... something?

As I’m walking toward the address that guy read out, I feel this strange sensation coming over me. And it keeps getting stronger the closer I get to the house. Because while I don’t know these streets at all, they’re starting to seem very familiar to me. And they grow more familiar with each step I take. They’re starting to become “my” streets, the streets where some aspect of myself has been living for the last several years. And as I draw near to 4139, I don’t even have to look at the number in order to recognize it for what it is. To recognize it as “my” house.

When I reach the front door, it turns out that my keys unlock it even though to me, they still look like the keys from G’s house. They open the door and let me into a middle-class, middle-American house that feels both familiar and unknown at the same time. A house that I know intimately even though I’m sure that I’ve never been inside before. A house in which I somehow know exactly where everything is.

And I feel a great sense of relief as I settle in for the next few hours, settle in to wait for the time when my wife will be getting home—my real wife that is. G’s wife M. Not this guy Ken’s wife, if he has one. So I make my way to the kitchen, that kitchen I somehow know so well, and there I make myself a sandwich which I carry out to the living-room. And then as I sit down on the sofa, I pick up the remote and turn on the TV, ready to spend the next few hours flipping through the channels and looking for something to take my mind off my worries. Something to help me forget, for a little while at least, just what a terrible mess my life has so abruptly and so unexpectedly become. My life or my lives.

So I try to settle in for hours of channel-surfing, but the truth is that I’m way too wound-up over the day’s events to be able to sit in one place for very long. And instead, I have to get up every few minutes and walk around, walk over to take a look out the window or to step out onto the porch or maybe to go wander around in the backyard. I have to move around. I have to pace in order to burn off some of my nervous energy as I kill time during the seemingly endless wait.

But then after an hour or two spent hanging around the house, intermittently sitting and pacing about, what level of peace and tranquility I’ve managed to achieve is suddenly shattered

by the sound of a piercing scream. And jumping up from where I sit in front of the tube, I turn to see a woman fumbling frantically in her purse for her cell phone or her mace or whatever it is that she's trying to pull out as she backs away from me toward the door. And when I see the way she's acting, along with the look of fear that fills her eyes, I say to myself, Well, I guess I'm not Ken anymore. And I say it kind of lightheartedly in spite of the adrenaline rush that her scream has given me. And next I'm trying to figure out what I should say to this woman, how I can explain my presence to her and how I can calm her down. But before I can get a single word out, her growing hysteria drives her away. It sends her charging out the door she just came in and running down the street screaming for help from the neighbors.

And me? I stand there flat-footed for a few moments longer, still working on my explanation—that explanation which I soon come to realize I'll be giving to a jury if I don't get the hell out of here. And get out right now! So with that thought in mind, I turn and make a dash for the backdoor, a place where I still have a chance of escaping whatever neighborhood patrol that lady is in the process of calling into action. As I head for the door, though, I immediately realize that I no longer know my way around the house like I did before. Not like I knew it when I was Ken. But at least I know one way out of here. I know the way this other guy must have come in, the way to the backyard and from there to the alley. And with the fear of capture pulsing ever more insistently through my veins and coming to dominate my thoughts, I soon give in and let this other person take over. I let him take complete control in hopes that he'll lead me out of the danger he's somehow gotten me into.

And where he takes me is down the alley in the opposite direction from the one in which the lady of the house took off running. He takes me to the end of the alley and from there over to another street and down another alley. And then once I've reached the end of that second alley, he makes me slow down to a walk, not wanting to call attention to himself—or should I say to ourself?—not wanting to attract attention now that we're out of the immediate danger zone. And as I sense him telling me to act casual, like nothing has happened, I soon come to realize that his criminal mentality is taking me over, too. That in giving in to him and letting him guide me away from the scene of whatever crime he was in the process of committing, I'm taking on more and more of his mind-set as well. I'm starting to think like a criminal as I follow his directions for block after block.

He finally leads me to a rather dilapidated old house where I—or we—walk up and unlock the front door. And then once we're safely inside, I follow him over to a table where I begin reaching into my coat pockets and depositing the objects I find there. Or better stated, I deposit nothing on that table since my hands come out of the pockets empty as far as I can see, and it's only after they've been left on the table that the objects ever become visible to me. A small wad of money and a watch, some pieces of jewelry and other small items, a handgun... A gun?! Where the hell did that come from?! I ask myself. And the next thing I know, I'm opening my coat and pulling something big out of it. Something which, when it becomes visible sitting upon the table, turns out to be a laptop computer. What the fuck?! I ask myself again. What type of thief has this guy turned me into?

And it's only when the person guiding my actions has me open the laptop, preparing to steal Ken's identity or empty his bank account or whatever evil plan it is that he has in mind, that I finally rebel against him and his control. Because it's one thing to allow his criminal cunning to

lead me away from the scene of a crime—a crime which I myself wasn't even committing as far as I know. But it's a whole other thing to go along with him while he pulls off another crime. That's something I refuse to do. So instead, after a short-but-sharp power-struggle, I force the two of us to leave the computer right where it sits. To leave it on the table unexploited until after I've had a chance to exchange his low-life body and mind for those of someone else. Those of an honest person, I hope. And so it's in order to facilitate that exchange, or that morphing or whatever it will actually be, that I force us to leave his crime-soaked house behind and head for somewhere else. I force us to head for the library branch which I originally set out for so long ago.

And as I walk in the direction of the library, I have a million questions to work out in my head. Like first of all, where did all that stolen stuff come from? How did it get into my coat when I have no memory of taking it? Because all I can remember doing in Ken's house is either sitting and watching TV or getting up and pacing around. I don't remember anything about rummaging through his stuff for things to steal, and in fact, I don't even remember leaving the living-room and kitchen areas. So when did I take all that stuff? How did I steal it without being aware of doing so? And without even being able to see the loot or feel it as long as it was in my coat? Now that part is totally bizarre!

And then doesn't that question about how the stuff got into my coat bring up yet another question? The question of how exactly I got from one body into the other. Because what happened to Ken anyway? Did I jump from his body into that of the thief at some point? Like say during one of the times when he stepped out into the backyard? Since Ken could have been leaving the house at that moment and not coming back. So that when I saw myself re-enter the place, it was actually as the thief. That could have been it, couldn't it? It certainly could, though of course it does nothing to explain where all the stolen stuff came from. But it's a possibility, isn't it? And it's no less likely than the possibility that I morphed from one person into the other which also fails to account for the stolen goods. So which of the two could it have been? Which of them makes more sense? Or does either of them make any sense at all? They don't seem to as far as I can tell, so does that mean that there's a third possibility? A third and maybe more? Like for instance, what if Ken was never there at all? What if he was actually at work the whole time and my presence in the house as him was nothing but an illusion? My presence as him and maybe even my presence as the thief?

It's all too strange for me. It's inexplicable being so completely at odds with everything that I've always considered to be logic and reality. It's all too... Well, I don't know what it is. But I just hope that at least the part about my being the thief is an illusion. Because with all the problems I already have to deal with, the last thing I need right now is to find myself dealing with the police, too.

Officer Tutt had received the call about an intruder in the neighborhood, and he'd heard the description: white male, medium height and medium build, wearing a dark coat and jeans. A description that probably fit seventy or eighty percent of the male population of this neighborhood, he told himself. And given the amount of time that had elapsed since the intruder had fled the scene, he knew that his chances of catching the guy were somewhere around zero. So the only thing to do was to take a courtesy cruise around the area. To show the badge and show that they cared. And he knew that the only thing that might give the bad guy away was his

behavior, like if he were to bolt upon seeing the police car or something like that. It was only his behavior that could betray him now.

Then as Tutt passed through the local commercial district, he spotted a suspicious-looking character, one whose appearance immediately drew his attention. And right away, he decided to give the guy a little test. He decided to pull up beside him and see how he reacted.

And you know it's almost psychic the way that, no sooner do I think about the law than a police car comes up from behind and pulls over a short distance ahead of me. It pulls over and the cop inside turns to look at me. And when I see him staring at me that way, it's like... Panic!! What should I do? Should I run? Should I try to talk my way out of this? Should I...?

The reaction turned out to be exactly what Officer Tutt had been expecting as an obvious look of fear came over the guy's face—the look of guilt—while at the same time he froze in his tracks. And the only thing that stopped Tutt from immediately jumping out of his car to confront the guy was the possibility that he might try to make a run for it.

But I can't run because if I do, that will mean I'm admitting my guilt, won't it? And I'm not guilty no matter how things may look. I didn't do anything wrong, and all I have to do is to prove it. But how can I ever do that? I ask myself. How can I prove my innocence? And how can I explain to this cop or anyone else that I entered that house as Ken the homeowner even if I ended up leaving it as a thief? How can I possibly explain something like that?

And as I stand there waiting for the cop to make his approach, I say to myself, Oh shit! Here I go. Off to jail for the next couple of years!

Tutt was out of the car once he saw that the guy wasn't going to turn jackrabbit on him. He was on his way over to ask him who he was and what he was doing around there. Because while the guy didn't fit the description of the intruder he was supposedly searching for, it was obvious that he'd been up to something. It was obvious that he had something to hide.

So the cop comes over and asks for my name and ID, and I don't know what to tell him since I have no idea who I am on the outside at the moment. But then I remember the fact that if I just tell him I'm G, he'll end up hearing some other name. He'll hear the name written on the ID hopefully. So that's what I finally do. And then after he looks at my driver's license for a minute, the next thing he says to me is, "So tell me Jermaine, what are you doing around here?"

Jermaine?! I say to myself. With a name like that, I've gotta be black. And I mean, a black man in a white neighborhood like this? And a thief on top of that?! Oh man! I'm not looking at a couple of years in prison. I'm looking at five-to-ten! Minimum!!

And while this character—this suspect—gave his name and handed over his ID, there was something evasive about the way he answered the questions he was asked. He seemed to have no clear explanation for what he was doing or where he was going. No explanation for what a gangsta-looking character from Tacoma like him was doing in a quiet neighborhood like that one.

Well, I don't know what to say to the guy, so I do my best to say nothing at all. Or at least nothing incriminating. But then all at once, there comes a moment when it dawns on me that his stopping me has nothing to do with the break-in at Ken's house. Because he isn't asking me where I was at the time of the break-in or anything like that. No, he's asking me why I'm here and where I'm going. And then when he mentions something about me being from Tacoma, that ices it for me. It proves that this guy Jermaine doesn't live at the thief's house I just left a few minutes before, which means that he isn't the thief after all. It means that he's not guilty of anything—or at least I hope he's not. It means that he's simply a black man being roused for walking in a white neighborhood.

And no sooner do I come to that conclusion than I feel a wave of offended innocence come washing through me. A wave that apparently comes more from Jermaine than it does from me, and the next thing I know, he's seizing upon it and running with it. "I'm just going to the library, officer," he soon has me—or us—saying in a whiny voice-of-the-oppressed. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

Officer Tutt didn't know what it was that set it off, but all at once, there came a moment when the suspect's attitude went through an abrupt change. Because rather than mumbling and dodging questions the way he'd been doing up until then, he suddenly threw out some wise-ass remark. It was the type of remark that would have earned him a good, solid beat-down if he'd said it in some quiet, isolated place, though out there on that well-transited street, things were different. And when some lady who heard the remark stopped to see what was going on, Tutt knew that he had to treat the situation with great delicacy.

"That's not why I stopped you, sir," he began to explain, firmly but politely, saying it more to their audience-of-one than to the suspect.

When I—or we—hear the way the cop answers us, the way he almost backs down on us, it seems to give Jermaine this huge burst of confidence. And since at the same time we can see out of the corner of our eye how the neighborhood busy-body has stopped to see what's going on, we—or actually he—takes it all in and decides to play the thing up even bigger. He decides to play the scene for all it's worth.

"Oh please officer, don't call me that name again," he has us whimpering as loudly as we can. "We black people don't like being called words like that anymore." And as we say it, we can see the lady pulling out her trusty video camera, the one she always uses to film speeders and litterbugs and other people she considers to be neighborhood nuisances. We see her pull it out and point it at us. And given the angle where she stands, we know that the cop can see her, too.

The next thing Officer Tutt knew, though, the suspect was making loud and completely unfounded accusations against him. And at the same time, the lady who had stopped to watch was pulling out a camera and pointing it at them. "Please put that camera away, ma'am," he told her as forcefully as he dared. But it wasn't long before the situation began to spin completely out of control as the suspect kicked his act into an even higher gear.

"Is it a crime for a black man to be in this neighborhood, officer?" he cried out in a loud voice, obviously saying it to the camera that was filming their every move. "Because the only

thing I'm guilty of is walking while black. That's the only thing!" he went on in his victim-of-racism role, making one unfair attack after another.

Jermaine is playing the race-card on that pig. Or better stated, he's playing the racist-card. Because right there in front of that lady's camera, he's openly—and loudly—accusing the cop of having stopped us for racist reasons.

Hey man, take it easy, I try to tell him. Don't push this thing too far, and don't make such a public spectacle of ourself. But it's like he can't hear me or like he won't listen. And when I try to put my foot down and make him stop, it doesn't take long for me to realize that he's now the one in control of the situation. That a strange role-reversal has taken place within my condition, whatever it may be. And that unlike in my earlier shared-embodiments where I was always the one in charge, the one making the decisions while feeding off the thoughts and memories of Steve or Ken or whoever, now it's Jermaine who is in control. He's the one feeding off me. He's the one making the decisions. And whether he's aware of my presence or not, he's using what I know about the neighborhood and the busy-body to further his own agenda. He's doing whatever the hell he wants, and all I can do is complain in silence. All I can do is watch and go along for the ride.

And he's getting to be dangerous, this Jermaine character is. He's turning into a public peril with the way he takes his black-man's-rage and combines it with my own sense of white-man's-immunity. And with the way he's playing the whole thing out with such exaggeration. The way he's pouring it out in front of that lady's camera.

"Please put that camera away!" Officer Tutt said once again as the accusations of racism flew at him with ever-increasing fury. And as he thought about the camera, he could just see himself on the six o'clock news. He could see this scene being played over and over again, and he could even read the headlines in the local paper: Police officer accused of racism! Racial profiling alleged in detention of innocent man! Racist officer suspended from force!... And on and on it would go.

And while he knew in his heart that he wasn't a racist and that his decision to stop this person had had nothing to do with racial profiling, how would he be able to prove that fact to the world? How would he ever be able to defend his actions after the scenes of his so-called racism had been played on television time after time after time? He wouldn't be able to, and he knew it. So the only thing left for him to do was to end this thing, to hand the driver's license back to Jermaine and apologize to him for the inconvenience.

"I'm sorry sir, but at first I thought you might be a burglary suspect I'm looking for, because you fit the description. Or at least you fit part of it," Tutt began his phony apology, leaving out any mention of the fact that the only way in which Jermaine fit the description was in the fact that both he and the burglar were males. "But I see now that it's not you, so I'm sorry for the inconvenience, sir, and uh... Have a nice day." And with that, Officer Tutt returned to his patrol car and his life of non-racist obscurity.

To my surprise, though, it actually works this Jermaine's playing the race-card the way he does. His playing it in front of that lady and her camera. Because before I know it, the cop is

backing down all the way, and he's even apologizing to us for the inconvenience. And with a sense of relief surging through me, along with the sense of elation that surges through Jermaine, soon the two of us—or the two of me—are strutting our stuff down the street. We're strutting along like we own the place. And as I watch Jermaine make a fool of us, jiving and dancing our shared body-and-mind down the sidewalk, the one thing I can be thankful for is the fact that I see him leading us toward the place I want to go. That whether through his own volition or through a suggestion I've somehow managed to implant in his mind—or should I say in his portion of our shared mind—he's taking the two of us to the library.

So he prances us all the way up to the door and then inside, but no sooner do we enter that little world of peace and calm than the place seems to get to Jermaine. It starts to deflate his over-inflated emotions. And his prideful strut becomes so reduced with each step we take that it's not long before we're walking just like a normal person. Much to my relief. And along with his dancing and his sense of elation, it seems like the strength of his will is fading away just as rapidly. So much so that it's not long before he's stepping all the way back and letting me take the lead in our search for reading material.

He's fading out, his emotions and his will, and I pay less attention to him with each passing minute. I concentrate on the books, and I ignore his ever-less-imposing presence. And in fact, I ignore it to such an extent that I completely miss the moment when his thoughts and his feelings disappear from my life altogether. The moment when I cease to be Jermaine. And since it only dawns on me later that I'm no longer him, it's only later that I begin to ask myself what might have happened to him. Is he still in the library? And can I find him after... however long it's been since I left his body? Can I find the young black man who was so recently me still hanging around in this library somewhere?

Because finding him now might give me the key to my condition at last, that key I failed to find after those earlier body-swaps. So this time around, I swear to myself that I'll be more diligent. I swear that I'll find him no matter what. And to that end, I start walking all over the library looking for him. But as I look, I can't find a black person anywhere, male or female, and when I step outside for a minute, I still fail to see a single black face. Or that is, unless that's one way over there in the distance, that guy getting into that car and driving off. He could be black, couldn't he? He could be Jermaine. But then again, maybe he's not. And maybe there aren't any young black men within miles of this place. Maybe Jermaine has disappeared without a trace. Or for all I know, maybe he was never here in the first place. Maybe he was nothing but an illusion all along, or at least his presence in the here-and-now was an illusion just like with those other guys. Steve and Ken. Those guys who might have been illusions or might not. Those guys who... Maybe...

I soon see that I'm wasting my time looking for him, and I abandon the search along with any hopes of finding an explanation. And instead, I return to the library where I resume the process of killing time while awaiting the hour of M's return. M and our little guy, too, I hope. Because what was the deal about picking him up from after-school care today? I ask myself. Was it that she would pick him up as long as I didn't call to tell her that I could do it since I didn't have a job? Or was it that she'd only pick him up if I called her and told her to? I can't remember which of the two it was supposed to be, not after everything I've been through today. And all I can do is hope that whichever one it was, she's figured out by now that it's up to her to take care

of him. Because there's nothing in the world I can do for that boy of ours anymore, not when I can't even find my own body. Not when I can't be G. So it's all up to her. Everything is up to M.

I'm not worried about our daughter, though, since she's probably home by now. That is if she didn't stop off at the house of one of her high school friends. But the little guy is still a couple of years from being independent, so we have to keep an eye on him all the time. And as I think about my boy and his situation, I start asking myself why I don't call M to find out what's going on. Why not look for a payphone since I'm not the cellphone-type? Or then again, why didn't I think about this back when I was at Ken's place? Why didn't I use his phone?

But no sooner do I think about phoning than I'm coming up with arguments against it. Because if I were to call her, whose voice would she hear coming over the line anyway? And in fact, would I even be able to dial her number, or would I only see myself dialing it while I'm actually dialing someone else? Someone related to the person whose body I'm sharing at the moment? Like say the person's wife—or maybe even their husband since there come times during my visit to the library when people's behavior toward me leaves the distinct impression that I'm a woman. And that's not to mention the times during which my taste in reading material runs toward the feminine.

So I finally argue myself out of making the call. And instead I hang around the library, reading this-and-that and pacing and killing time as the minutes tick slowly by. Ever so slowly. They tick by one minute every half-hour it seems as I await the moment of my deliverance, or at least what I hope will be my deliverance. That moment when everything will come to a head. When I'll stand facing M and with a simple smile, she'll save me—or then again, maybe she won't. Maybe she won't smile and maybe she won't know me, and maybe I'll be lost. Forever! Because it will be at that moment when either she'll recognize me and welcome me back to my life—my real life, the one I've been living as G during all these years—or else she won't know me and I'll be... What? Who will I be? Will I be...? Oh, I don't know who or what I'll be if she doesn't recognize me. So she just has to! She has to know me!!

And it's the thought of that second possibility that makes me hesitate when the time finally comes for me to return home. It makes me hold back, unsure that I'm ready to face such a monumental moment of truth. A moment whose outcome could prove to be so absolutely devastating. One that could end in a loss of self so complete and so final. And so it's not until long after the time when M should be home that I finally get up the courage to leave the comfort of the library and begin the walk home. The walk of destiny. The walk that seems to last an eternity in spite of the short distance involved. The walk at the end of which my entire future will be determined and my fate revealed. Either my salvation or my perdition. Either my return to self or the total disappearance of G.

And with so much at stake, my heart is pounding uncontrollably as I climb the steps of my house. G's house. It's pounding so hard that I'm not sure how my ribs can contain it. As I reach the door, I think about trying the keys one more time but decide against it, not wanting to scare M in case the attempt should fail. So instead, I bet everything I have on a single throw of the dice. I bet it all: my future, my past, my very sense of self. I bet it all on M recognizing me when she opens the door and sees me.

With trembling hands I reach out and ring the bell, but she doesn't answer me right away, and this in spite of the fact that her car is parked outside. In spite of the fact that she has to be home. And as I stand there waiting for second after second after minute, my heart begins to sink almost literally. It begins to drop down toward my guts, taking its crazy pounding with it and churning my innards into a swirling pool. And meanwhile in my head, I'm trying to deny the truth that's staring me ever more clearly in the face. Trying to deny that the reason M isn't opening up is because she's seen me through the peephole and hasn't recognized me. Trying to deny to myself that the worst has indeed come to pass.

And as I stand there, I feel everything sinking so fast within me, everything falling apart so completely, that I no longer know how to think or to act. I'm helpless. I'm frozen. And it's only after a long struggle and a huge effort of will that I ever find a way to open my mouth and make my vocal chords function. To yell to her, "I'm here about G," which are the only words I can think of that might convince M to come out and talk to me.

M looked out the peephole when she heard the doorbell ring, but not recognizing the man who stood there, she wouldn't open the door for him. Not when she and the kids were home alone. So instead, she stood silently by the door as she waited for the man to leave. But then after he'd been there for several minutes, he spoke to her through the door saying something about her husband and calling him by name. And with that, she finally relented and opened up to hear what he had to say. Because she'd been wondering what had happened to G that day, why he hadn't come home or hadn't called, or why he hadn't at least left her a note. She was wondering why he had so suddenly and so uncharacteristically dropped out of sight. So she opened up, and then she stood facing this man who claimed to know something about him. This stranger. This person she was seeing for the first time ever.

When she finally opens the door and looks at me, though, that's it!! That's when the bottom falls out completely. And I mean completely. So completely that the bottom of the bottom seems to fall out, too, the shock is that overwhelming. It's something so far beyond any shock I've ever felt before. And how I manage to stay on my feet through it all, I'll never know. How it is that I don't fall down and die right there in front of her. Because with the way she looks at me, like she's never seen me before in her life, there's something inside me that dies right then and there. I swear it does. Some part of myself. Some part of G.

And while I've been trying to prepare myself mentally and emotionally for the possibility of this shock, having asked myself over and over again what I'd do if she doesn't know me, still there's nothing I could have done that ever would have prepared me for this awful moment. This moment when the worst of my nightmares becomes reality. When I look into her beautiful green eyes only to see nothing. Nothing at all. No light of recognition and no sign that she has the least idea who I am. Because all I see when I look into those eyes of hers is the blank look she would give to any stranger.

When M opened the door, though, the man said nothing to her immediately. Instead he stood staring at her for the longest time. And he stared with the strangest, most bewildered look on his face. He stared the way a person might when looking at a whole new reality he'd never seen before. And it was only after a long silence, one during which M debated whether or not to slam the door on this odd though inoffensive-looking person, that her curiosity finally got the

better of her and she decided to break the ice by asking him what he wanted and what he knew about G.

I want to say something to her, but I can't speak. Not when I see the way she's looking at me. And even when she asks me what I want, still I can't make a sound. I can only move my lips while nothing comes out. Not a word. Not a grunt or even a sigh.

But even after M had asked him, the man still failed to answer. He still stood there with that strange, uncomprehending look in his eyes. He stood like he didn't know how to speak. And it was only after she'd asked him several times what he wanted, just as she began to close the door on him, that he finally said something back to her.

I can't say what I want to say. That is if I want to say anything at all. Because no longer being G, I have no idea what to tell her. And it's not until I see her stepping back to close the door that words finally come out of my mouth. They come from somewhere, I know not where, and I don't even know what they are or what they mean until after I've heard them spoken myself. "G won't be back."

What the man said was that G wouldn't be back. And he said it so plainly and with such a knowing tone in his voice that it startled M into immobility. It stopped her arm with the door in mid-swing, and she immediately began to pour out the questions that flooded her heart. "How do you know? What's happened to him? Where is he?" She assaulted him with one question after another.

She hears me say those words and right away, she wants to know more. She wants me to give her the details. But how can I do that when I don't know myself? When I don't even know who or what spoke those words just now, and I don't know how? And as I struggle to tell her more, the best I can do is repeat the same information in slightly different words. "G is gone," I tell her at one point. And later, "He'll never be back."

This strange man wouldn't answer the questions that M shot his way, though, and instead he said the same thing over and over again with only the slightest of variations. And as M continued to pump him with futile questions, she didn't know what to think. She didn't know if she should believe him or not. She didn't know if he was insane or what.

But her questions keep coming at me in spite of the fact that I can't answer them. They come though with ever longer pauses between since I respond to most of them with silence. And as I hear those words of hers and the tone in which they're spoken, I feel such a huge sense of loss growing within me. Because I know that these are the last moments I'll ever be spending with M. I know that the questions she's asking me now are the last words I'll ever hear her speak. And with the tragedy of our parting in this way grasping at my heart, I feel myself starting to miss her already even as she stands before me.

I realize that everything is over. Everything there's ever been between us. I realize that I won't be spending the rest of my life with her after all, not like I always thought I would. And instead I'll have to get by without this woman I've loved and lived with for so long. This woman who has loved me too, perhaps. This woman who has tolerated me in any case. Who has put up with my stupidity and my narrowness and my self-centered ways for all these years. And I can

see now that she has put up with those things for nothing. She has put up with them only to be abandoned by me in the end. To be left with nothing. Not a word, not a sign, not even a goodbye.

And as the tragedy of her situation fills my heart and mind with regrets, I'm suddenly struck by the thought of an even greater tragedy. I'm struck by the thought of the kids having to grow up without a father. Because even worse than a woman being suddenly and inexplicably abandoned by her husband is the tragedy of children being abandoned in the same way. And it isn't so much my daughter I'm worried about since she's old enough to deal with it. Old enough and strong enough being that she and her mother have always been the strong ones in the family. But what will happen to the boy? I want to know. How will it be for him growing up without the father who left one day without a word? Without an explanation? The father who all at once disappeared from his life without a trace?

And I want to cry when I think about that little guy and the life he faces without me. I want to find the words to express a sadness that goes far beyond tears. But I know that it's no use. I know that in the body I now inhabit, I can't explain anything to anyone. I can't tell M what I know or what I feel. And I couldn't say a word to the boy either, even if I were able to see him from where I stand. Because it's over. That whole life of mine is over, and I'm no longer his father. The father he'll never see or hear from again. The father he'll have to forget about and get by without. Somehow.

And as I stand and look at his mother, I feel such an overwhelming sense of remorse toward him. Toward her. Toward all of them. I feel so very sorry for these people who have done nothing to deserve this cruel fate of theirs. These people who deserve it even less than me. Because M hasn't changed. I can see that as I stand facing her. I can see that she's still the same person she's always been, small and pretty, honest and intelligent. And the only problem is that I'm no longer the person I used to be. I'm no longer her husband, and I'll never be that man again. I'm someone else now, and G is... He is no more. He's ceased to exist. He's... nothing!

And the only thing left for me to do now is to walk away. To leave behind the remnants of this life I used to live. But before I go, I want to say something to M. I want to thank her for everything she's done for me and everything she's meant and everything she's been. I want to thank her, and I want to apologize. I want to say something that will make it all better. Something that will express everything I feel and explain everything I know. But when I try to speak, I can't do it. I can't make a sound. And soon I'm struggling within myself in my effort to tell her something. I'm struggling with my other self. I'm fighting and I'm insisting, and I refuse to give in. And finally I manage to make myself speak, though just barely. I manage to say, "Good luck." Just those two words, those weak and meaningless words. Good luck and nothing more after all the years we've been together. After a whole lifetime.

Finally it all came to an end. Those occasional repetitions of a single phrase followed by prolonged silences, and those incomprehensible yet tragic looks from the man who had come to her door. Those looks that had touched her deeply with their throbbingly intense aura of pain and sadness and loss. It all came to an end as the man suddenly blurted out a single short phrase, "Good luck," and then turned and walked down the steps. And as she stood watching him go, half-paralyzed with an overwhelming sense of grief, M felt as though some strange power were trying to reach out to her through those last words the man had spoken. She felt as

though it were trying to convey something more to her. Something deep and heart-felt. Something that would make everything she had seen and heard become clear.

Yes, she felt that power, that godhead perhaps, trying to speak to her on some other level. On that level where the most profound truths are spoken. She felt it reaching out to her and trying to get its message across. Trying but failing. Failing utterly in its attempt to get through to her.

When I reach the street, my memories of G and his life are already beginning to fade. They're becoming the memories of some other person and some other life. They're no longer memories of my own life. But instead they're the memories of a life I never lived and a person I never was. And arriving at my car—my real car, my SUV, not G's little car which was never even there—I pull the keys out of my pocket and reach out to unlock the door. I reach out with my own hand holding my own keys. I don't reach out with G's hand. And then once I'm inside, I begin to drive toward home, that home where I've been living for years now. I drive off, and I leave behind that other guy's house and that neighborhood which I've never seen before this day. I drive along with my memories of G falling away quickly. Very quickly.

So quickly that soon they were gone completely. All recollection of G or of his ever having been G. And as those memories disappeared, he began to ask himself why he had stopped at that house and why he had talked to that woman about her husband. Why was I so interested in that guy when I've never seen or heard of him before? he asked himself. Why did I go there to talk about him?

And it wasn't long before the only thing J could still remember from the events of that day was the strange, enigmatic visit he had paid to that woman and her house. The visit during which he had failed in his attempt to convey some sort of information to her about her husband, information which he himself hadn't fully understood. But then after he'd driven on for a few more miles, even that was gone. That last memory of the person he had been and the life he had lived for so many years. That last fragile memory of a person named G. It was gone. It was lost forever. And with it, G himself was gone as well. He had disappeared without a trace. He had vanished. Just like he had never existed at all.

DEATH

Do you know what the funniest thing about being dead is? Or at least the funniest thing for me, since I don't know what it'll be for you. That's something you'll have to find out for yourself when the time comes. But for me, the funniest thing is what death does to time. The way it changes your whole perception of what time is and what it's about. Because once you're dead, all you've got is a past. There's no future. There's nothing but a huge blankness when you look off in that direction. And the present? Well, you still have one of those of course, but it's not much of one. It's nothing like the present you had back when you were alive and had a future to project it into. It's a present without a future which is nothing but a pale imitation of itself. It's a washed-out version of a living person's present.

And the loss of the future has been especially hard on me. It's been devastating, in fact, given the way that I've always lived so much of my life in the future. The way I've spent so much time thinking ahead and making plans for the things I wanted to do while letting the past go. Letting it fade away. The way I've always abandoned my memories without remorse. Always ignored them, those lingering echoes of events which are dead-and-gone. But now that I'm dead myself, the past is all I have left. It's all there is of G, just a fading record of things done and a life lived. Just that and nothing more, nothing to look forward to and nothing but a lost glory to look back upon. Or an illusion of glory in any case, the memory of a glory that probably never existed outside my own imagination.

And as I look back upon it now, I can see that even if my past had actually been as great and glorious as I once believed it to be, still it offers me nothing to cling to now that it's become my only reality. Because it's so insubstantial, so subjective even, that now it seems more like a dream than a reality. Now it seems like... nothing.

Like pure fantasy. My past and my memories. They seem like nothing but illusion. As much so as everything else in this strange world I now inhabit. And I'm not only talking about my own memories, but I'm also referring to those of others. The other dead that is. Those illusory beings I sometimes encounter in this otherwise empty and featureless world. Because we're all illusions, all of us, with our illusory souls and our illusory pasts. None of us are real. None of us contain any substance.

And just as insubstantial are the so-called heavens and hells and happy hunting grounds which some of the dead arrive here in search of. Those places which don't exist and can't be found, so that whenever someone thinks they've found one, what they've really found is illusion. An illusion just as great as that giant hallucination which the living call the "real world." And I want nothing to do with any of it. No phony substitutes to replace my lost future. No make-believe worlds to aspire to. No empty promises of heaven and no more rounds of birth-and-death. And instead I want something solid. I want something real.

But the only thing that even begins to approach the status of reality in this strange nether-world is the light. The Great Light which suffuses this world of the dead. And while the light itself is no more real or impressive than the Great Light I saw on a couple of occasions when I was alive, still it seems quite impressive here in this vacuum-like world where it has nothing to compete with. Here where it's the only game in town.

And any moment now I'm going to head for that light. I'm going to take my first steps in its direction. Or rather I should say that I'm going to let the light come to me since there's nowhere for me to go. Not with the light being everywhere the way it is. So it's not a matter of approaching the light or following it since it has no location in space. No center and no limits. And if I were to seek out a center, I would only succeed in getting myself lost. I would be seeking an illusion, an imaginary center, and I would follow it into a world of illusion just as surely as if I were to follow any of those other illusions. Those imaginary heavens or hells or those rebirths. I would follow it right back into the world of ignorance. Because being that it's an all-enveloping light, it's only a matter of letting myself go. It's a matter of giving up my last, most deeply-held illusions: my here-and-now, my self, my very sense of being and existence.

So instead of seeking anything or willing anything, I simply give in and let the light take me. I let it do as it pleases, and I don't try to hold things together. I let it all go. All my illusions of oneness and existence. All my illusions of a unified, cohesive being. I let everything about myself go. I let the light have it all, everything that I've ever called Me.

And soon things are starting to come apart. All the energies and ideas that adhere to the Me are starting to fly away. They're leaving Me forever and dispersing throughout the universe. The memories are going one by one. The impressions and the preferences. The loves and the likes and the dislikes. The fears and the hopes. And of course the opinions. And soon even the self-impressions are starting to go. The self-images. Those energies which are most intimately attached to the Me. They're all going away, all of them. They're leaving for who-knows-what reincarnated destiny.

And before long, even I begin to go. Even I begin to float off and leave the Me behind. And I... Yes, here I go. I'm off to... Hey wait a minute! What's happening? Where am I? Where did I go? And where is Me? And where...?